WHY READ AND DISCUSS LUKE–ACTS?

There’s a revolutionary movement loose in the world today that’s very different from, and much bigger than, the shadowy networks and armed bands we hear about on the news. It doesn’t use violence or deception to achieve its goals. It isn’t political, or even religious, in the usual sense of that term. But it’s still committed to overthrowing all established authorities and implementing a new vision of what human society should be. This movement is the spreading influence of what Jesus called the “kingdom of God.” It’s embodied in the community of Jesus’ followers.

How did this community begin? How has it spread around the world? How does a person become part of it? What are its aims and goals? What will it accomplish in the end? People have been asking these questions ever since Jesus started this movement back in the days of the Roman Empire. Fortunately for us, a gifted historian named Luke lived at that time and wrote a two-volume account of the origins, development, and worldwide spread of the “kingdom of God.” He wrote this account for a friend, a Roman official named Theophilus, who was asking these very questions. When we read Luke’s history today, we’ll find the answers ourselves, and we’ll also experience an invitation to become part of this movement personally.

The first volume or book in this history is now known as the gospel of Luke. It tells the story of Jesus’ life, giving particular emphasis to how his actions and teachings brought the kingdom of God to earth and how he established a community that was committed to its values and destiny. The second volume is known as the book of Acts. It tells how the community of Jesus’ followers, which was initially only about 100 people in the city of Jerusalem, expanded and multiplied so rapidly that within a generation it had
spread throughout the entire Roman Empire. From there, it has since spread to every corner of the world.

You may have seen Luke and Acts treated as separate books. But they're actually two parts of a single history. So get some friends together to read and discuss Luke–Acts as a whole work. This study guide will walk you through it. When you do, you'll discover how the kingdom of God has been breaking into our world ever since the time of Jesus, and how you can become part of its revolutionary mission: to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, and sight for the blind; to set the oppressed free; and to proclaim the Lord's favor.
Also available in the Understanding the Books of the Bible series:

John
Genesis
Wisdom: Proverbs/Ecclesiastes/James
Biblical Apocalypses: Daniel/Revelation
Thessalonians/Corinthians/Galatians/Romans
Lyric Poetry: Psalms/Song of Songs/Lamentations
Job—November 2011
Colossians/Ephesians/Philemon/Philippians/Timothy/
Titus—November 2011

Future releases:
Exodus/Leviticus/Numbers
New Covenants: Deuteronomy/Hebrews
Samuel–Kings
Amos/Hosea/Micah/Isaiah
Zephaniah/Nahum/Habakkuk/Jeremiah/Obadiah
Ezekiel/Haggai/Zechariah/Jonah/Joel/Malachi
Chronicles/Ezra/Nehemiah/Esther

Matthew
Mark
Peter/Jude/John

LUKE–ACTS

Christopher R. Smith
CONTENTS

FOR LEADERS

How These Study Guides Are Different 1

LUKE

SESSION 1
Experiencing the Book of Luke As a Whole 12

SESSION 2
God Gives Zechariah and Elizabeth a Son with a Special Mission 16

SESSION 3
Jesus Is Born in Bethlehem and Dedicated in the Jerusalem Temple 21

SESSION 4
John Announces a “Baptism of Repentance” and Jesus Is Baptized and Tested 25

SESSION 5
Jesus Teaches in the Synagogues of Galilee and Is Opposed by Religious Leaders 29

SESSION 6
Jesus Chooses and Instructs Twelve Apostles and Demonstrates God’s Compassion 34

SESSION 7
Genuine Hearing, Faith and Fear, and the Identity of Jesus 38

SESSION 8
Anticipating the Day of Judgment and Making Judgments about Jesus 43

SESSION 9
Answering for Our Loyalty to Jesus and for Our Relationship to Wealth 47

SESSION 10
Who Will Be Saved? Not Who You’re Expecting . . . 51

SESSION 11
Receiving or Rejecting Jesus and the Kingdom 55

SESSION 12
Conflict in Jerusalem Over Jesus’ Identity and Authority 59

SESSION 13
Jesus Celebrates the Passover with His Disciples and Is Arrested and Tried 63

SESSION 14
Jesus Is Executed on a Cross but Then Rises from the Dead 67
FOR LEADERS

HOW THESE STUDY GUIDES ARE DIFFERENT

Did you know you could read and study the Bible without using any chapters or verses? The books of the Bible are real “books.” They’re meant to be experienced the same way other books are: as exciting, interesting works that keep you turning pages right to the end and then make you want to go back and savor each part. The Understanding the Books of the Bible series of study guides will help you do that with the Bible.

While you can use these guides with any version or translation, they’re especially designed to be used with The Books of The Bible, an edition of the Scriptures from Biblica that takes out the chapter and verse numbers and presents the biblical books in their natural form. Here’s what people are saying about reading the Bible this way:

I love it. I find myself understanding Scripture in a new way, with a fresh lens, and I feel spiritually refreshed as a result. I learn much more through stories being told, and with this new format, I feel the truth of the story come alive for me.

Reading Scripture this way flows beautifully. I don’t miss the chapter and verse numbers. I like them gone. They got in the way.

I’ve been a reader of the Bible all of my life. But after reading just a few pages without chapters and verses, I was amazed at what I’d been missing all these years.
For more information about *The Books of The Bible* or to obtain a low-cost copy, visit http://www.thebooksofthebible.info. Premium editions of this Bible are scheduled for future release from Zondervan at your favorite Christian retailer.

For people who are used to chapters and verses, reading and studying the Bible without them may take a little getting used to. It’s like when you get a new cell phone or upgrade the operating system on your computer. You have to unlearn some old ways of doing things and learn some new ways. But it’s not too long until you catch on to how the new system works and you find you can do a lot of things you couldn’t do before.

Here are some of the ways you and your group will have a better experience of the Scriptures by using these study guides.

**YOU’LL FOLLOW THE NATURAL FLOW OF BIBLICAL BOOKS**

This guide will take you through Luke–Acts following its natural flow. (The way this two-part work unfolds is illustrated in the outlines on pages 10 and 74.) You won’t go chapter-by-chapter through Luke–Acts, because chapter divisions in the Bible often come at the wrong places and break up the flow. Did you know that the chapter divisions used in most modern Bibles were added more than a thousand years after the biblical books were written? And that the verse numbers were added more than three centuries after that? If you grew up with the chapter-and-verse system, it may feel like part of the inspired Word of God. But it’s not. Those little numbers aren’t holy, and when you read and study the Bible without them, you’ll hear its message more clearly than ever before.

To help you get a feel for where you are in the natural flow of Luke–Acts, the sessions will be headed by a visual cue, like this:

**Book of Luke > Second Section: Journey to Jerusalem**

**YOU’LL UNDERSTAND WHOLE BOOKS**

Imagine going to a friend’s house to watch a movie you’ve never seen before. After only a couple of scenes, your friend stops the film and says, “So, tell me what you think of it so far.” When you give your best shot at a reply, based on the little you’ve seen, your friend says, “You know, there’s a scene in another movie that always makes me think of this one.” He switches to a different movie and before you know it, you’re watching a scene from the middle of another film.

Who would ever try to watch a movie this way? Yet many study guides take this approach to the Bible. They have you read a few paragraphs from one book, then jump to a passage in another book. The *Understanding the Books of the Bible* series doesn’t do that. Instead, these study guides focus on understanding the message and meaning of one book at a time. Your group will read through Luke–Acts in its entirety, not just selected chapters or verses.

Sessions 1 and 15 are overviews that will let you experience Luke and Acts as two parts of a single work, to prepare you for considering their individual sections. (You can either do these sections separately, before doing the sessions on each book, or together, to experience Luke–Acts as a whole.) Reading through an entire book at once will be like viewing a whole movie before zooming in on one scene. Groups that read books of the Bible aloud together have a great experience doing this. (If you’ve never done it before, give it a try—you’ll be surprised at how well it flows and how fast the time passes.)

For these overview sessions, the discussion will be briefer and designed to allow people to share their overall impressions. If you’re using *The Books of The Bible*, you may find it helpful to read aloud the invitation (introduction) in that edition to Luke–Acts before reading each of its two volumes.

**YOU’LL DECIDE FOR YOURSELVES WHAT TO DISCUSS**

In each session of this study guide there are many options for discussion. While each session could be completed by a group in about an hour and a half, any one of the questions could lead to an involved conversation. There’s
no need to cut the conversation short to try to “get through it all.” As a group leader, you can read through all the questions ahead of time and decide which one(s) to begin with, and what order to take them up in. If you do get into an involved discussion of one question, you can leave out some of the others, or you can extend the study over more than one meeting if you do want to cover all of them.

TOGETHER, YOU’LL TELL THE STORY

The suggestions for reading will often invite the group to dramatize the Scriptures by reading them out loud like a play. The discussion options may invite group members to retell the biblical story from fresh perspectives, for example, from the point of view of one of the characters. This kind of telling and retelling is a spiritual discipline, similar to Bible memorization, that allows people to personalize the Scriptures and take them to heart. This discipline is very timely in a culture that increasingly appreciates the value and authority of story.

If you’re using The Books of The Bible, you’ll find that the natural sections it marks off by white space match up with the sections of the reading. If you’re using another edition of the Bible, you’ll be able to identify these sections easily because their openings and closings will be clearly described.

EVERYBODY WILL PARTICIPATE

There’s plenty of opportunity for everyone to participate, by reading the Scriptures (often taking the part of one of the characters), or by introducing the study or the discussion questions to the group. Group leaders can involve quiet people naturally by giving them these opportunities. And everyone will feel they can respond, because the questions aren’t looking for “right answers.” Instead, they invite people to pursue deeper understanding. In many cases the group will work together on a response.

YOU’LL ALL SHARE DEEPLY

The discussion questions will invite you to share deeply about your ideas and experiences. The answers to these questions can’t be found by just “looking them up.” They require reflection on the meaning of each story, in the wider context of the book it belongs to, in light of your personal experience. These aren’t the kinds of abstract, academic questions that make the discussion feel like a test. Instead, they’ll connect the Bible passage to your life in practical, personal, relational ways.

To create a climate of trust where this kind of deep sharing is encouraged, here are a couple of ground rules that your group should agree to at its first meeting:

Confidentiality. Group members agree to keep what is shared in the group strictly confidential. “What’s said in the group stays in the group.”

Respect. Group members will treat other members with respect at all times, even when disagreeing over ideas.

HOW TO LEAD GROUP STUDIES USING THIS GUIDE

Each session has three basic parts:

Introduction to the Study

Have a member of your group read the introduction to the session out loud to everyone. Then give group members the chance to ask questions about the introduction and offer their own thoughts and examples.

Reading from Luke–Acts

Read the selection out loud together. The study guide will offer suggestions for various ways you can do this for each session. For example, sometimes you will assign different characters in the story to different readers, and
sometimes different people will read different episodes. (In some sessions, reading and discussion will be combined.)

Discussion Questions

Most questions are introduced with some observations. These may give some background to the history and culture of the ancient world or explain where you are in the flow of the book. After these observations there are suggested discussion questions. Many of them have multiple parts that are really just different ways of getting at an issue.

You don’t have to discuss the questions in the order they appear in the study guide. You can choose to spend your time exploring just one or two questions and not do the others. Or you can have shorter discussion of each question so that you do cover all of them. As the group leader, before the meeting you should read the questions and the observations that introduce them, and decide which ones you want to emphasize.

When you get to a given question, have someone read aloud the observations and the question. As you answer the question, interact with the observations (you can agree or disagree with them) in light of your reading from the Bible. Use only part of the question to get at the issue from one angle, or use all of the parts, as you choose.

TIPS FOR HOME GROUPS, SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASSES, COMMUNITY BIBLE EXPERIENCES, AND INDIVIDUAL USE

If you’re using this guide in a home group, you may want to begin each meeting (or at least some meetings) by having dinner together. You may also want to have a time of singing and prayer before or after the study.

If you’re using this guide in a Sunday school class, you may want to have a time of singing and prayer before or after the study.

This study guide can also be used in connection with a community Bible experience. If you’re using it in this way:

• Encourage people to read, by themselves early in the week, the part of the story that will be discussed in that week’s session

(except for sessions 1 and 15, when the whole church will gather to hear Luke and Acts read out loud, either on separate occasions or on a single occasion).

• Do each session in midweek small groups.

• Invite people to write/create some response to each small-group session that can be shared in worship. These might involve poetry, journal or blog entries, artwork, dramas, videos, and so on. Some of these may be created because of specific questions in this guide that invite and encourage artistic responses.

• During the weekend worship gatherings, give people the opportunity to share their responses, and have preaching on the part of the story the community has experienced that week. Speakers can gather up comments they’ve heard from people and draw on their own reflections as well.

• In the following week the community will then read, discuss, and respond to the next part of the story, and the worship gathering will once more center around it.

This guide can also be used for individual study. You can write out your responses to the questions in a notebook or journal. (However, we really encourage reading and studying the Bible in community!)

Note: Anytime you see italicized words in Scripture quotations in this book, the italics have been added for emphasis.
LUKE
OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF LUKE

Session #

PROLOGUE
2 Birth of John
3 Birth and youth of Jesus
4 John proclaims a “baptism of repentance”
   Jesus’ baptism, genealogy, and temptation

MAIN BODY
FIRST SECTION: IN GALILEE
Groups of episodes alternate between Jesus teaching and doing works of power and authority
5 Jesus teaches in the synagogues
   Works of liberation; conflict
6 Teaching about the kingdom of God
   Works of mercy and compassion
7 The secrets of the kingdom of God
   Responses of faith and fear

Who is this Jesus?

SECOND SECTION: JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM
8–9 First phase: Questions of judgment
10 Second phase: Who will be saved?
11 Third phase: Responses to Jesus
12 Fourth phase: Conflict over Jesus’ identity and authority

THIRD SECTION: IN JERUSALEM
13 Passover celebration, Last Supper
   Arrest and trial of Jesus
14 Jesus is executed on a cross
   Jesus rises from the dead
EXPERIENCING THE BOOK OF LUKE AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

The book of Luke is the first part of a two-volume history that describes the origins and growth of the community of Jesus’ followers. Take a moment to have someone read aloud the material entitled “Why Read and Discuss Luke–Acts?” at the beginning of this guide. It explains how the books of Luke and Acts work together to tell the story of that community.

In this session you’ll read the whole book of Luke out loud together. As you listen to it, watch for how it’s developing. It has an extended prologue, which sets the stage by describing the events surrounding Jesus’ birth and telling how he was prepared for his important mission. The main body of the book then has three sections:

• The first section takes place in Galilee, the northern part of the land of Israel. It focuses primarily on the powerful things Jesus did that authenticated his message about the kingdom of God.

• The second section portrays Jesus on a long journey to Jerusalem. Its primary concern is with Jesus’ teaching, particularly with his answers to the questions and challenges that various people pose along the way. Jesus continues to engage people like this once he gets to Jerusalem and begins teaching in the temple.

• The third section describes how, during the Passover festival, Jesus gave his life in Jerusalem as the Savior of the world.

Because the basic dynamic of the book is a movement from Galilee to Jerusalem, Luke uses “travel notices,” summary descriptions of Jesus moving from one place to another, to mark off the sections (and some of the sub-sections) in the main body of the work. For example, the second section begins, “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.”

This three-part structure reflects Luke’s desire to address a broad audience—not just his friend Theophilus, but anyone who’s interested in knowing about Jesus and the community he founded. Some readers will be Jews, and they’ll be particularly interested in knowing that through Jesus, God did the same kinds of powerful signs he did through Moses and the prophets, as the first section describes. Other readers will be Greeks, and they’ll be struck by how Jesus displayed a wisdom as rich as the greatest of their philosophers, as the second section describes. But the most important thing to appreciate about Jesus is the meaning and impact of his death, which is described in the third section. The overall purpose behind Luke’s three-part structure in this...
first volume of his history can be summarized in the words of his coworker, the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians: “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified.”

READING

As a group, take turns reading through the book of Luke out loud together. This should take about two hours. The group can take short breaks during the reading if it would like, in between the major sections of the book (as described above). Luke is on pages ****–**** in the NIV edition of The Books of The Bible. If you’re using another edition of the Scriptures, you can find Luke in the Table of Contents.

When it’s your turn to read, think of yourself as telling the story to the rest of the group. Let the next person take their turn whenever you feel you’ve come to a natural break in the story. You can follow the breaks that are marked by white space in The Books of The Bible, but if you wish, you can read only part of a longer passage, or read several short passages together. If you prefer not to read aloud, it’s fine to pass when your turn comes. (When you get to the list of Jesus’ ancestors near the end of the prologue, just do the best you can pronouncing those long Hebrew names.)

As you read, you can follow how the overall story is unfolding by looking at the outline on page 10, and you can find the places it mentions on the map on page 11.

DISCUSSION

What things struck you the most as you listened to the book? Were there some things you’d never heard or noticed before in the story of Jesus?

What do you think of Jesus after hearing the story of his life? If you’re comfortable sharing this, tell the group how you relate to Jesus right now—who you think he is and what place he has in your life. What questions do you have about Jesus that you’re hoping will get answered as you discuss the book of Luke in more detail?

Was this the first time you’d read a whole book of the Bible out loud in a group? If so, what was the experience like, compared to other ways you may have read the Bible, by yourself or with others? If you have read other whole books aloud with people, tell the group which books and in what settings. How was this experience reading Luke like, and unlike, those experiences?
SESSION 2

GOD GIVES ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH A SON WITH A SPECIAL MISSION

INTRODUCTION

The main movement in the book of Luke is from Galilee to Jerusalem. The prologue to the book anticipates this movement by presenting five journeys that individual characters take to Jerusalem (or at least to Judea). The opening story in the book, which tells how Zechariah and Elizabeth have a son named John, includes two of these journeys:

• Zechariah goes to Jerusalem to serve as a priest in the temple.
• Mary travels from Nazareth to visit Elizabeth in Judea.

On these journeys significant events take place that help set the stage for the main action of the book. As you’ll see, the story of Jesus begins to unfold even as this story of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John is told.

READING

Note: This guide will ask you to read and discuss big chunks of the biblical story at once. This may be more reading than you’re used to doing in Bible studies. But this will give you the opportunity to experience the story as a story, so you can see your life in a new way in light of this story. As we’ll discover in the sessions ahead, for Luke, one of the most important ways to understand what God is doing through Jesus is to hear his story and then take it to heart. This is what these extended readings will allow you to do. So as you’re reading and listening, remember that the goal of this activity is to hear the story and catch its grand sweep, not start studying and discussing it after you’ve heard only a little bit.

Have someone read the first paragraph of Luke, which explains the purpose of the book.

Then read the story of how Zechariah and Elizabeth have a son named John, up to the place where Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesies about the boy’s future and where Luke describes briefly how he grew up. Read the story out loud like a play, with people taking these parts:

• Narrator
• Gabriel (the angel of the Lord)
• Zechariah
• Elizabeth
• Mary
• Elizabeth’s neighbors and relatives (choose one spokesperson)

DISCUSSION

1 Many of Israel’s earlier leaders and deliverers (Isaac, Jacob, Samuel, etc.) were born to couples who couldn’t have children. God had them born this way as a sign that he was going to do great things for the nation through them. The pattern continues here with Zechariah and Elizabeth. But it’s taken to another level entirely with Mary, who conceives Jesus while she’s still a virgin, so that her child will be “the Son of God.”

The virgin birth is supposed to be an extraordinary, unprecedented sign, so we shouldn’t question it on the grounds that things like this don’t ordinarily happen. But what do you think of the idea that God can do miracles like this in the first place, transcending the natural order of things?
GOD GIVES ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH A SON WITH A SPECIAL MISSION

What was at stake for Mary in saying yes to God here? (In this traditional culture, what difficulties would she face by having a child without a husband?) How do you think Mary was able to say yes despite what was at stake? If you’ve said yes to something difficult, tell the group about your experience. Is God asking you to do something difficult now?

Zechariah is punished by being made unable to speak after he asks Gabriel, “How can I be sure of this?” But Mary isn’t punished when she asks, “How will this be?” Why the difference?

Besides giving birth miraculously to a heaven-sent deliverer, what other opportunities are there for couples who can’t have children to be a vital part of God’s work in the world?

The story of John, and the story of Jesus that it introduces, are in Luke’s day the latest chapters in a much bigger story that’s been unfolding for centuries. By the time Gabriel appears to Zechariah and Mary, the people of Israel have already been in a relationship with God for many generations. And so each of these three figures uses language that situates what God is now doing within the unfolding story of that relationship. Even though the Israelites are under Roman occupation, with their religion and culture restricted and threatened, they still have the vivid expectation that God will intervene, as Zechariah puts it, “to rescue us from the hand of our enemies.” This expectation is based on promises God made to Israel’s ancestors and past leaders: Mary and Zechariah anticipate that God will help them because of the covenant (agreement) he made with Abraham, the ancestor of the Israelites; Gabriel and Zechariah recall God’s promise to King David that one of his descendants will always rule over Israel.

In addition to expressing their hopes based on these covenants, all three speak in language that’s laced with other allusions to what God has done for the people in the past. Gabriel tells Zechariah that John is “never to take wine or other fermented drink,” echoing the instructions an angel gave to the parents of Samson, one of Israel’s earlier deliverers. When Gabriel describes John as similar to Elijah and says he will “turn the hearts of the parents to their children,” he’s quoting the prophet Malachi. When Zechariah says that John will “go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,” and speaks of those “living in darkness and in the shadow of death,” these are allusions to Isaiah. And so forth.

So the birth of Jesus as a ruler and deliverer in the line of David, and the birth of John to prepare the nation for him, aren’t unexpected events. The people of Israel have been eagerly anticipating the time when God will “remember his holy covenant” and send them deliverance through figures just like these.

Do you see the story of God presently continuing on earth? How would you describe how this is happening, in fulfillment of God’s promises and echoing his past actions?

Besides alluding to the prophets, Mary and Zechariah echo the Psalms at several places in their songs: God’s “mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation” (Psalm 103); God has “filled the hungry with good things” (Psalm 107); and God will bring “salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (Psalm 106). Mary’s song as a whole is strongly reminiscent of one that a woman named Hannah sang after giving birth to Samuel, another of Israel’s great leaders.

Mary’s song of praise outlines what sounds like a revolutionary political and economic program. Established rulers will be “brought down . . . from their thrones” and replaced by those who are presently powerless. The hungry will be “filled . . . with good things,” but the rich will be sent away “empty.” Has the coming of Jesus had these results in our world? If you’d say yes, describe where and when. Does Mary’s song, when understood within this
story as a whole, give followers of Jesus a mandate to work for political freedom and economic justice, as part of what God is doing to extend “mercy . . . from generation to generation”?

Encourage the songwriters and poets in your group to compose something about what God is doing in their lives or in the world right now, using language and imagery drawn from the Scriptures and from other songs that describe God’s work in the past. Everyone in the group can contribute their own ideas and suggestions. Once these songs and poems have been written, provide an opportunity for them to be shared in your group or in a worship gathering.

JESUS IS BORN IN BETHLEHEM AND DEDICATED IN THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE

INTRODUCTION

The prologue to Luke now tells how Jesus himself was born and grew up. It describes two more journeys to Jerusalem:

- Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem to register for a Roman census, and after Jesus is born there, they bring him to Jerusalem and dedicate him in the temple.
- When Jesus is twelve years old, his parents bring him from Nazareth back to Jerusalem for Passover (an annual Jewish festival).

Once again, on these journeys significant events take place that help set the stage for the main action of the book.

READING

Have three people read these parts of the story of Jesus’ birth and youth:

- Jesus is born in Bethlehem. (Begin with the census decree by Caesar Augustus, and end when the shepherds return to their fields.)
DISCUSSION

After all the excitement about God saving the people of Israel from their enemies, the name of Caesar Augustus suddenly appears as a harsh reality check. Augustus orders a census, a count of all the people in the empire, to make sure that everyone pays taxes to Rome. Occupation and oppression are still the order of the day. But even this decree actually plays into God’s hands. It brings Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, the “town of David,” so that Jesus will be born there, illustrating how God will indeed “give him the throne of his father David.”

Joseph and Mary are likely staying with a friend or relative, but their home is crowded with others who’ve come for the census. So the two of them have been put on a lower level or in an outbuilding with the farm animals. Even though Mary is late in her pregnancy, she’s not given comfortable accommodations in the home, probably because the family considers her situation shameful. So when Jesus is born, he is placed in a “manger” or feeding trough. But this unusual circumstance becomes a sign that the angel can use to identify the newborn Savior to the shepherds.

A large group of Joseph’s relatives and friends are just upstairs or in the next building. Why doesn’t the angel announce to them that Mary’s son is “the Messiah, the Lord”? Why do you think the angel chooses to tell the shepherds this “good news that will cause great joy”? (“Messiah” means “anointed one” in Hebrew. The Greek equivalent is “Christ.” This title refers to the special agent of God’s salvation that the people of Israel are expecting.)

Simeon and Anna are deeply devoted to God and looking forward eagerly to what he will do for Israel and the rest of the world. But they’re both already so old that they won’t be alive to see what Jesus will say and do in thirty years. So God gives them a special preview, by directing them to meet Jesus now and revealing to them that he’s the Messiah.

Do you believe God has ever directed you somewhere or arranged for you to be in a place so you could meet someone special or see something significant?

Do you know an older person who’s gotten a glimpse before they died of a promising future or a hint of what their legacy would be? Tell their story.

Gabriel told Zechariah and Elizabeth to name their son John, and he told Mary and Joseph to call their son Jesus. These names are significant.

- John means “God is gracious.” Elizabeth says, “In these days [God] has shown his favor,” and Zechariah says that God is acting “to show mercy.”
- Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, which means “Yahweh is salvation.” (“Yahweh” was the name God used when making his covenant with Israel.) The angels announce that Jesus is “a Savior,” and when Simeon holds him in his arms, he tells God, “my eyes have seen your salvation.”

As the story unfolds here, it becomes clear that the salvation God is bringing through Jesus will affect people far beyond Israel. The angels sing that Jesus’ birth will bring “on earth peace” to all on whom God’s favor rests. Simeon says that God has prepared his salvation “in the sight of all nations” and that Jesus will be a “light for revelation to the Gentiles” (non-Jews), as well as “the glory of your people Israel.”

What does your name mean? Do you know why it was chosen for you? Can you see spiritual significance in the meaning of your name?
In addition to his significant name, Jesus is described by many titles in the prologue to Luke, for example, “Son of the Most High.” Divide your group into teams to reread the different sections of the prologue and find as many of Jesus’ titles as you can. Have each team share its list, and discuss as a group what these titles mean or signify. (Add to this list in the sessions ahead as you see Jesus addressed by further names and titles.)

Going to Jerusalem for Passover gives Jesus the chance to ask the most learned teachers in Israel all the complex and profound questions about God and the Scriptures he hasn’t yet found answers for. His questions, and his own “understanding” and “answers,” are so remarkable that the session lasts for days. Clearly God is going to do something special through this boy.

What people, living or historical, would you most like to put together in a room to ask your deepest questions about God, life, and its meaning? What are some of the questions you’d ask?

**SESSION 4**

**JOHN ANNOUNCES A “BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE” AND JESUS IS BAPTIZED AND TESTED**

**INTRODUCTION**

The prologue to Luke ends by telling how John prepared the people of Israel for what God was about to do, and how Jesus was prepared for his own ministry through a time of testing. (When Jesus travels from Nazareth to the place where John is baptizing in the Jordan River, this is one more journey from Galilee to Judea that anticipates the main movement in the book.)

**READING**

Read, out loud like a play, the story of how John comes to “prepare the way for the Lord.” Begin where you left off last time, and end where King Herod puts John in prison. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Isaiah (quotation)
- John
- The crowd
- Tax collectors
- Soldiers
Then have someone read the short description of what happens when Jesus is baptized.

You don't need to read the list of Jesus' ancestors out loud again, but let people skim through it and see which names they recognize.

Finally, read the story of how Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Read it like a play, with people taking these parts:

- Narrator
- Jesus
- The devil

The person who plays the devil should try to make the temptations sound as attractive as possible.

**DISCUSSION**

1. John begins to fulfill his special mission by calling the people to “repentance.” This means giving up the wrong things they've been doing and doing right by one another instead. As a public sign that they're committed to this, and that God has forgiven the wrong things they've done, John “baptizes” the people in the Jordan River. That is, he immerses them in the water to show they've been washed clean. This is why John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, is called “John the Baptist” (i.e. the Baptizer) later in Luke.

   ➤ According to John, repentance is more than just saying you’re sorry or asking for forgiveness. He tells the people they must “produce fruit in keeping with repentance”—they must change their lives in practical, demonstrable ways. How does John answer each of the three groups who ask him, “What should we do?” What would it look like for people today to put these same instructions into practice, as a sign of genuine “repentance”?

   ➤ Do you know someone who’s come to sincere faith in God and demonstrated this through practical repentance by seeking reconciliation or making restitution? If so, tell their story.

2. Jesus himself is baptized, not because he's been doing a lot of wrong things he needs to give up, but because he wants to show how eager he is to be a part of what God is about to do.

   At his baptism, God, in a voice from heaven, publicly acknowledges Jesus as his Son. This confirms that Jesus is the “Son of God” in a legal sense. We've already seen that Jesus is the “Son of God” in a physical sense because of the virgin birth. And after describing the baptism, Luke demonstrates how Jesus is the “son of God” in yet another sense by tracing his lineage all the way back to Adam, who, he says, was the “son of God.” (This is probably a reference to the way the book of Genesis describes human beings as created in the “image of God.” It suggests that Jesus will fulfill his mission as a representative of the whole human race. This shows once again that the salvation he's bringing is not limited to the people of Israel. Instead, as Isaiah says, “All people will see God’s salvation.”

   ➤ Do you agree or disagree with the following argument? Explain why.

   The word “repentance” comes from the Greek term metanoia. Since meta means “change” and noia means “mind,” metanoia means to “change your mind.” Repentance is essentially a change in what we believe about God and about ourselves in relationship to God. To say that repentance is really a change in the way we act towards God or others only encourages people to try to be saved by works rather than by faith.

   ➤ Have you been baptized? If so, share with the group why and when and how. If not, tell the group under what circumstances and conditions, if any, you think you might be baptized.

   (Note: Luke doesn't explain until the book of Acts what John means when he says here that Jesus will baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” We'll consider this in session 16.)
But what will it mean in practical terms for Jesus to be an agent of worldwide salvation as the Son of God? The Holy Spirit leads him to spend 40 days in the wilderness reflecting on this. The devil comes and tempts him to embrace a version of his mission that’s patterned on the world system Jesus is supposed to overthrow. “If you are the Son of God . . . ,” the devil asks repeatedly, why not make it all about getting the goods? Or being in charge? Or showing how invincible you are? But Jesus, steeped in the Scriptures that describe what God really values for people, rejects each of these suggestions. The devil leaves “until an opportune time.”

Do you believe you’ve ever experienced spiritual forces trying to influence you to do the wrong thing? How would you describe these forces? How can a person know when these forces are at work?

Ask the actor who portrayed the devil to share what it was like to take on this role, even briefly.

If, as Jesus’ example teaches here, life isn’t all about getting money, power, and fame, then what is it about?

What special purpose do you believe God has for your own life? What would it look like to fulfill this purpose according to God’s values, rather than in pursuit of money, power, and fame? Would you consider taking a “vocational retreat,” as Jesus does here, to give yourself some extended time to reflect on how you should fulfill your life purpose?

INTRODUCTION

After the prologue, we move into the main body of the book of Luke. Its first section takes place in Galilee. The particular emphasis of this section is on the powerful things Jesus does and how they authenticate his message. Luke introduces this section with one of his characteristic travel notices: “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit . . . ”

The Galilee section of Luke is made up of several groups of episodes. Each group has a particular focus. Groups that describe Jesus teaching alternate with groups that show him doing powerful acts that authenticate his message.

In this session we’ll consider the first and second groups of episodes. The first portrays Jesus teaching in synagogues (Jewish houses of worship) throughout Galilee. The second describes how, as Jesus travels about and performs many exorcisms and miracles of healing, the religious leaders of the nation (the “Pharisees” and “teachers of the law”) feel threatened by his powerful actions and unconventional approach, and they come increasingly into conflict with him.
READING

Have different people read the following episodes in the story of Jesus' ministry in Galilee:

(First group of episodes: Jesus teaches in the synagogues)

• In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus reads from the Scriptures, and the people become so angry they nearly throw him off a cliff.
• In the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus casts a demon out of a man.
• At Simon's home, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law and many sick people, and then he decides he must go to other towns as well.

(Second group of episodes: Jesus does powerful works and comes into conflict with religious leaders)

• Jesus teaches from a boat on the Lake of Gennesaret. He then helps Simon, James, and John catch a great quantity of fish.
• In one of the towns, Jesus heals a man who has leprosy.
• Jesus heals a paralyzed man whose friends lower him down through the roof.
• Jesus calls a tax collector named Levi to follow him, and this leads to a debate with the Pharisees about fasting. Jesus ends the debate by telling a parable about patches and wineskins. (A "parable" is a story that teaches by drawing a comparison.)
• The Pharisees challenge Jesus about picking grain and healing on the Sabbath, but he heals a man with a shriveled hand anyway.

DISCUSSION

1 Here, as the main body of the book begins, we’re introduced directly to the central concept of Luke–Acts. As soon as Jesus returns to Galilee, he goes to the synagogue in Nazareth and reads one of Isaiah’s prophecies. He says this prophecy describes his personal mandate as a Spirit-anointed agent of God. Jesus explains that he will proclaim “good news” and that this will be accompanied by powerful signs of healing and liberation. Shortly afterwards, Jesus summarizes his mission by saying, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.” This whole two-volume work is actually a history of the “kingdom of God,” the powerful spiritual reality that God brings to earth to fulfill his covenant promises.

As Jesus teaches and heals in Galilee, we begin to get an idea of what the kingdom of God actually is. The people are amazed at Jesus’ authority, that is, his power to command and be obeyed. “With authority and power he gives orders to impure spirits,” they marvel, “and they come out!” Simon Peter models the ideal response to Jesus of a citizen of the kingdom of God. When Jesus tells him to let down his fishing nets, he doesn’t want to. “But,” he says, “because you say so, I will let down the nets.” The kingdom of God is not a political entity or territory; it’s a sphere of influence. It’s where God’s wishes are carried out without resistance. As Luke–Acts progresses, we’ll find out much more about what kind of human community God is asserting his authority to create.

In these two groups of episodes Luke gives several examples of Jesus healing individual people. What does each case reveal about Jesus and the character of the kingdom of God? (Example: outside Simon’s house, the evil spirits identify Jesus as the “Son of God,” and casting them out demonstrates that he will “set the oppressed free.”)

Luke says more generally that when the sick were brought to Jesus, he healed “each one” of them. Have you, or has someone you know, experienced what you consider a divine healing? What happened? Why doesn’t everyone who prays for healing today receive it? (At the end of this session there are some observations on this question that you can interact with once you’ve all shared your own thoughts.)
Luke also describes several incidents of exorcism, where Jesus casts demons out of people. In the last session you were asked whether you thought there are spiritual forces that try to lead people into evil. Can a person give in to these forces to such an extent that they come under their control completely? What would this look like in today’s world? According to your present understanding of who Jesus is, could he set free a person who came completely under the control of evil spiritual forces?

Another of Jesus’ signs is an amazing provision for fishermen who’ve “worked hard all night” but “haven’t caught anything.” This may be one expression of how the kingdom of God brings “good news to the poor.” (As Mary said, “He has filled the hungry with good things.”)

Have you ever experienced God providing abundantly for you in a time of need? How can followers of Jesus today demonstrate the gracious, generous character of the kingdom of God by providing for those in need?

Even though Jesus is going around only doing good and bringing healing, abundance, and liberation, he soon encounters opposition. The people in his home town of Nazareth see him just as “Joseph’s son,” and they resent his claims to be a chosen agent of God. The Pharisees hold to a strict interpretation of Moses’ commandment not to work on the Sabbath (the seventh day of the week). So when Jesus heals on the Sabbath, arguing that it’s a day to “do good” and “save life,” they’re outraged. They’re also offended by his claim to have authority to forgive sins and by the way he associates with people they consider “sinners.” By the end of these episodes, they’re discussing “what they might do” to him.

Why do you think the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were so opposed to him?

What about Jesus offends you? What have people told you about him, or what have you read about him in the Bible, that makes you angry or upset? Why do you respond this way?

In these episodes Jesus orders several people not to tell others who he is. Why do you think he does this?

Observations on discussion point 1, question 2: Jesus healing the sick to announce the coming of the kingdom of God, but not permanently eliminating sickness from the earth, may be like a new government marking its inauguration by granting an amnesty to some, but not all, of the prisoners in its jails. This demonstrates the government’s intention to build a peaceful society on the rule of law, where everyone participates honestly and freely, but it also reflects its recognition that this new society is only beginning to be built. In the same way, the kingdom of God has already come, but it hasn’t yet arrived in its fullness.
SESSION 6

JESUS CHOOSES AND INSTRUCTS TWELVE APOSTLES AND DEMONSTRATES GOD’S COMPASSION


INTRODUCTION

Jesus continues to travel throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the kingdom of God through miracles. But now, in the third group of episodes in this section of Luke, he chooses twelve of his followers to work closely with him. Eventually he will send them out on their own to extend his ministry. But first he gives them detailed teaching about the character and values of the kingdom of God. Then, in the fourth group of episodes, he brings them with him to watch and learn as he does powerful acts of mercy and compassion, to assure the Israelites that “God has come to help his people.”

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read the description of how Jesus prayed and chose twelve apostles, and how they and a large crowd gathered to hear his teaching and be healed. Then take turns reading one paragraph each of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples, ending where he compares a person who doesn’t follow his teaching to someone who builds a house without a foundation and it collapses.

ços Which of these specific teachings strikes you the most, as something you want to put into practice in your life right away? (Give everyone in the group the chance to respond to this question.)

ços Taken as a whole, what values do these teachings describe? Work together as a group to create a list of specific words that summarize these values. (For example, “forgiveness,” “generosity,” etc.)

ços The revolutionary theme of Mary’s song (“he has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty”) emerges once again, as Jesus says, “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. . . . Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.” Is the coming of the kingdom of God bad news for some people? Who, and why? What do these people need to do to experience the kingdom as good news? (What would John the Baptist tell them to do?)

2 Have four different people read the next group of episodes in Jesus’ continuing ministry in Galilee:

• Jesus heals the servant of a Roman centurion (an officer in charge of 100 soldiers).
• Jesus raises a widow’s son from the dead in the town of Nain.
• John the Baptist sends messengers to ask about Jesus, and Jesus then talks to the people about John.
• In the house of a Pharisee, Jesus forgives a repentant woman who anoints his feet with perfume from an alabaster jar.

Jesus’ earlier miracles in Galilee demonstrated how the kingdom of God brings liberation (from the control of evil forces, from the stigma and isolation of leprosy, etc.). The miracles he now does in this group of episodes demonstrate a further reality of the kingdom: the mercy and compassion that God wants to show to people, even those outside Israel. The centurion is spared
the loss of a dear friend and loyal helper. The widow has her only son, who is her sole source of support, restored to her. The woman with the alabaster jar has made (or been forced into) wrong choices, but she’s welcomed, accepted, forgiven, and restored. Jesus appeals to all of these works of compassion to reassure John the Baptist that he is indeed “the one who is to come.” That is, he’s the Messiah, the special agent of God’s salvation that the people of Israel are expecting.

When have you personally seen followers of Jesus demonstrate the merciful, compassionate character of the kingdom of God? Share some favorite examples. (These can be times when you were treated with compassion yourself, or when you had the opportunity to extend it to others, or episodes you’ve seen or heard about.)

John the Baptist had told the crowds to expect imminent judgment against all of God’s enemies: “The ax is already at the root of the trees.” But Herod has thrown him in prison, and God hasn’t done anything about it yet. So John sends messengers to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come?” (Implying, “If so, why aren’t you getting me out of here?”) Jesus responds that he’s indeed the Messiah, and the kingdom really is coming, but it isn’t exactly what John is expecting it to be. Have you ever felt disillusioned like John, perhaps in times of personal suffering, wondering why God doesn’t get with the program as you understand it? Does Jesus’ answer here help you?

This part of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee continues to reveal the kingdom of God as the sphere of God’s unquestioned authority, where God’s intentions for human community are honored. This theme appears at the end of the third group of episodes, when Jesus asks, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” The theme is also developed in the exchange between the centurion and Jesus. The centurion, because of his place within a chain of command (“I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me”), knows that important things are accomplished not primarily through power (by forcing people to do them), but through authority. Someone in a legitimate position commands and is obeyed. The centurion says to Jesus, “Say the word, and my servant will be healed.” Jesus responds, “I have not found such great faith even in Israel.”

The word “faith” is often used to mean believing in something strongly enough to make it happen. But here Jesus uses the word instead to describe how the centurion recognizes his legitimate authority. Similarly, when the woman with the alabaster jar of perfume responds to Jesus with spontaneous gratitude, knowing without even speaking to him that he will extend forgiveness, Jesus tells her, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” If faith is defined as recognizing Jesus’ authority as the Son of God and his willingness to use that authority to bring healing and liberation, how would you describe the faith you have in Jesus right now? Would adopting this definition change the way you relate to Jesus?
SESSION 7

GENUINE HEARING, FAITH AND FEAR, AND THE IDENTITY OF JESUS

Book of Luke > First Section: In Galilee > 5th, 6th, & 7th Groups of Episodes

INTRODUCTION

The groups of episodes in the Galilee section of Luke continue to follow the pattern of describing Jesus teaching, then showing him doing powerful acts that authenticate his message. Here in the fifth group of episodes, Jesus’ teaching is about how to understand the “secrets of the kingdom of God,” that is, how to recognize what God is doing in the world and how to become a part of it. The powerful acts that Jesus then does in the sixth group of episodes draw out contrasting reactions: people respond to him either in faith or in fear.

The seventh and final group of episodes focuses directly on the overall theme of the Galilee section: who is Jesus, particularly in light of all the powerful things he has done?

READING AND DISCUSSION

1. Have three different people read the fifth group of episodes:
   - Jesus travels around Galilee with the twelve apostles and a group of women.
   - Jesus tells and interprets a parable about a farmer sowing seed.
   - Jesus’ mother and brothers try to see him.

As Jesus teaches the crowds here, it becomes evident that not everyone truly understands the “secrets of the kingdom of God.” They’re not recognizing what God is doing, and they’re not becoming part of it. Put another way, the kingdom of God is the sphere of God’s unquestioned authority, where God commands and is obeyed (Jesus once again praises “those who hear God’s word and put it into practice”), but not everyone obeys when they hear. Why not?

Jesus tells a story about a farmer sowing seed to illustrate how our response to God’s word depends on the condition of our heart: It’s only “those with a noble and good heart” who “hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop” (the fruit of a life lived for the kingdom).

So how does a person get this kind of heart? Jesus says earlier that a good person “brings good things out of the good stored up in [their] heart.” Luke has already given us a model to follow of a person storing up good things in her heart. He’s told us twice how Mary “treasured up” the events surrounding Jesus’ birth and dedication and “pondered them in her heart.”

All of this means that the first step in hearing and obeying is genuinely hearing: paying careful attention to the story of God as it’s told to us and unfolds around us, and pondering how it discloses God’s character and intentions. (“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear,” Jesus says.) This is what Luke wants his own readers to do as he tells them the story of the kingdom of God, beginning with Jesus.

Do you agree with the following statement? (Why or why not?)

“You can be told the story of God, but if you don’t take it to heart, you won’t become part of it when it intersects with your life.”

In practical terms, how do you go about paying careful attention to what God is saying? What habits or attitudes help? What habits or attitudes get in the way? What have you tried that has or hasn’t worked? Does it seem to get easier or harder?
2 Have three people read the sixth group of episodes:

- Jesus calms a storm on the lake.
- Jesus casts many demons out of a tormented man in the region of the Gerasenes.
- Jesus heals a woman who touches the edge of his cloak and raises Jairus’s daughter from the dead.

The earlier groups of miracles in the Galilee section demonstrate how God wants to bring healing and liberation and show mercy and compassion. The miracles Jesus now does show that people can and should respond to God’s assertion of authority in faith rather than in fear. Jesus tells the woman who touches the fringe of his garment, just as he told the woman with the alabaster jar, “Your faith has healed you” (literally “saved you”). “Go in peace.” Once again, faith doesn’t mean believing in something hard enough to make it happen but rather confident trust in Jesus’ legitimate authority and his intention to do good.

 Look back over these three episodes and identify the places where people respond to Jesus either in fear or in faith. (Notice words like “afraid” and “believe,” which means “have faith” and comes from the same root as “faith” in Greek.) Why do you think the people who respond in fear don’t have confidence in Jesus? Where do you think the ones who respond in faith get their understanding of who Jesus is? (This isn’t stated explicitly in the text, but what can you infer?)

 On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is a consistent fear of Jesus based on the impression that he represents an angry, hostile God, and 10 is a consistent trust in Jesus as someone who is willing and able to help, where do you find yourself on a typical day? How can a person move farther up the scale from fear to faith?

 How was the woman’s simple act of touching Jesus’ cloak able to release such great healing power?

3 Finally, have people read these episodes:

- Jesus sends the twelve apostles out to “proclaim the kingdom of God.”
- Herod wonders who Jesus is and tries to see him.
- When the apostles return, Jesus takes them to Bethsaida, and when a crowd follows them to that “remote place,” Jesus feeds 5,000 men (among women and children) with five loaves and two fish.
- Jesus asks his disciples who the crowds think he is, and who they think he is. He warns them that he will suffer and die and that they must “take up their cross” and follow him.
- On a mountaintop, Jesus shines in glory and speaks with Moses and Elijah.
- Jesus casts an evil spirit out of a boy.
- Jesus warns his disciples again that he will suffer and die, and he teaches them that “it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest” and “whoever is not against you is for you.”

As the Galilee section draws to a close, its central concern with Jesus’ identity comes to prominence. As Herod puts the question, “Who, then, is this I hear such things about?” There’s much speculation about who Jesus might be, but he’s already explained this to John the Baptist: His powerful works of liberation and compassion show that he’s indeed the “one who is to come,” or, as Peter puts it, “God’s Messiah.” If “Jews demand signs,” Jesus has given all the signs needed to recognize that he’s introducing God’s reign and that it has a gracious, healing character. But a handful of Jesus’ disciples are privileged to see the kingdom of God in another of its expressions. Jesus brings them up on a mountain, where he suddenly shines in dazzling glory and meets with Moses and Elijah, two of Israel’s greatest leaders. The kingdom of God may have a small and humble beginning on earth, but one day its true power and splendor will become evident, when “the Son of Man . . . comes in his glory.”

 Do you tend to think of the kingdom of God as primarily a future reality, which Jesus will introduce when he returns, or as a present reality, which followers of Jesus live out on the earth? (If
you can, name some books, films, etc. that have helped shape your understanding.) How can each of these two perspectives on the kingdom help inform and enrich the other one?

ANTICIPATING THE DAY OF JUDGMENT AND MAKING JUDGMENTS ABOUT JESUS

INTRODUCTION

The next major section in Luke describes a journey that Jesus takes from Galilee to Jerusalem. In this section, the focus shifts from the signs Jesus does to the wisdom he displays as he interacts with people he meets. This shift is reflected in the way individual episodes begin. In the Galilee section, episodes typically begin with a reference to the time when, or the place where, Jesus does something. (For example, “Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain.”) But in the journey section, episodes more often begin with someone coming up to Jesus and asking a question or posing a challenge. (For example, “On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.”)

But there are still some strategic references to time and place. The journey has four phases, and Luke introduces each phase with a travel notice that uses a particular Greek word for “journey” or “journeying.” For example, here, “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem”—or more literally, he set out “to journey to Jerusalem.”

Each phase of the journey explores an overall theme, which appears in most of its episodes. Luke introduces the theme of each phase in the opening episode. In this first phase, the theme is judgment: How will people who’ve
encountered Jesus be rewarded or punished “at the judgment,” based on how they’ve responded to him? How wise and reasonable are people’s present judgments about how to respond to Jesus? The judgment theme is introduced at the start when the disciples ask about a Samaritan village that hasn’t welcomed them, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?”

(We’ll consider this first phase of the journey in two sessions, this one and the next, because of its length.)

READING

Have people take turns reading these episodes in the first phase of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem:

- Jesus heads for Jerusalem and is refused hospitality by a Samaritan village.
- Jesus dialogues with three would-be followers.
- Jesus sends seventy-two workers out to the places he expects to visit; they return triumphantly and Jesus talks to them about their experience.
- An expert in the law tests Jesus, and Jesus responds by telling a parable about people who did and didn’t help a man who was attacked by robbers. (This has become known as the parable of the Good Samaritan.)
- Jesus visits Martha and Mary in their home.
- Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer.
- Jesus is accused of casting out demons by “Beelzebul, the prince of demons,” and he shows how unreasonable this accusation is.
- Jesus answers a woman who calls out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth.”
- Jesus talks about the “sign of Jonah,” and about light and darkness.

DISCUSSION

1. In these episodes Jesus repeatedly uses the phrases “on that day” and “at the judgment” to refer to Judgment Day, when God will reward or punish individuals and communities based on how they’ve responded to the call to repentance. (Remember the meaning of repentance that was developed in session 4, discussion point 1.) Jesus speaks of several cities—Sodom, Tyre, and Sidon—that were destroyed for their wickedness earlier in Israel’s history. He says that it will be “more bearable on that day” for them than it will be for communities like Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum that witnessed his great miracles but didn’t repent. Jesus also talks about how the city of Nineveh “repented at the preaching of Jonah” (an ancient Hebrew prophet) and says it will “stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.” In the same way, the Queen of Sheba (the “Queen of the South”), who came a great distance from her country to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, will condemn those contemporaries of Jesus who could listen to his even greater wisdom right in their own country but who’ve ignored him.

- Do you like the idea of a Judgment Day, when people will be called to account for any injustice and oppression they’ve gotten away with in this life, and when those who’ve repented and sacrificially worked for good will be acknowledged and rewarded? Is there anything about this idea that makes you uncomfortable?

2. These episodes also take up the theme of judgment in the sense of good and bad responses to Jesus in the present. Three men need to sort out their expectations and hesitations as they consider following him. Some of Jesus’ opponents see his great works of deliverance and ascribe them to an evil source, Beelzebul (another name for the devil). But others show better judgment in their responses to Jesus. When the “expert in the law” answers his counter-challenge by saying that love for God and neighbor is the essence of the Law, Jesus replies, “You have answered correctly.” And when Mary chooses to sit and listen to Jesus, rather than being distracted with preparations for entertaining like her sister Martha, he offers this judgment: “Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

- You and a friend are relatively new to a high-powered workplace where you’re expected to put in long hours. Things are going well so far, and you both have good prospects for advancement. But one day your friend tells you he wants to join an intentional community of Jesus’ followers in your city that’s part
of the “new monastic” movement. (If you’re not familiar with this movement, use an Internet search engine to find out more about it.) As part of their commitment to one another, the members of this community pledge to share an evening meal together every day. Your friend will have to cut back on his work hours to honor this commitment. Do you think he’s making a good choice or a bad choice?

Besides the theme of judgment, these episodes take up several other topics. Jesus gives practical instructions to his “harvest workers,” and he teaches about prayer. He describes love for neighbor through the parable of the Good Samaritan. He stresses the importance of being “full of light” (probably meaning, in the context, being open to Jesus rather than resistant to his message). And these episodes also continue to emphasize that the kingdom of God is the sphere of God’s unquestioned authority. Jesus responds to the woman who blesses his mother, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it,” and he tells the law expert who challenged him, “Do this and you will live.”

Which of the episodes in this session do you have questions about that you’d like the group to help you answer? Which episodes would you like to say something about and hear the group’s reaction? Give everyone the opportunity to mention something if they wish.

If Jesus’ journey passed through your town, what would you like to ask Jesus as he came by?

INTRODUCTION

As the first phase of the journey to Jerusalem continues, Jesus engages more people who ask questions and pose challenges. The theme of judgment is raised in several more episodes.

READING

Take turns reading through the remaining episodes in the first phase of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Begin where you left off last time, and end just before the travel notice that introduces the next phase of the journey (“Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem”). Each person should read until they feel they’ve come to a natural break, such as a place where a new person asks Jesus a question or where Jesus begins a new topic in his teaching, and then let the next person take their turn.
DISCUSSION

1 The conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders becomes more and more intense. A Pharisee invites Jesus to dinner in his home and is “surprised” (astonished) that Jesus doesn’t perform a ceremonial hand-washing before eating. This leads Jesus to offer a long denunciation of the Pharisees and experts in the law as people who focus on external rules but who “neglect justice and the love of God.” After this exchange, the religious leaders “oppose him fiercely.” Jesus has to warn his disciples not to be afraid of what these leaders might do to them. The one they should really “fear” is God, who can impose an eternal judgment. So they should always acknowledge publicly that they’re followers of Jesus, knowing that Jesus will in turn acknowledge them “before the angels of God.”

- What kinds of external rules have you heard people try to enforce for followers of Jesus? How can a person move from a focus on externals to a focus on “justice and the love of God”?

- In your society and culture, what risks and dangers are associated with being a follower of Jesus? What authorities (political, religious, family, professional, etc.) are opposed to this, and what measures do they take against it? How have you, or people you know, suffered for acknowledging Jesus? If you’ve been hesitant to acknowledge him because of the risks, what initial steps can you take to be more open about your faith, without being reckless or taking unnecessary risks?

- In session 7 we saw how Jesus wanted people to respond to him in faith rather than in fear. But now Jesus tells his disciples to “fear” God because he “has authority to throw you into hell.” Work together as a group to explain the difference between a healthy fear of God and an unhealthy one.

2 Jesus tells several parables to illustrate that people should live in such a way that they’re always prepared to give an account for their lives, since they could die (as in the parable of the rich man), or Jesus may return (as in the parables of the servants), when they least expect it. Besides having to answer for whether they’ve acknowledged or denied Jesus, people will also have to answer at the judgment for how they’ve related to their material possessions. “Watch out!” Jesus warns. “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” Rather, he says, his followers should make the pursuit of God’s kingdom, not the pursuit of wealth, their aim, trusting that God knows and will meet all of their genuine needs. “Sell your possessions and give to the poor.” Jesus says, and you will have “a treasure in heaven that will never fail.”

- If you were “financially independent,” and didn’t have to work to meet your basic needs, how would you like to spend your time? Can you begin to build some of this activity into your life even now?

- What’s the overall message you get about money from your culture? Sum it up in a sentence if you can. What are the main channels that this message comes through? How would you critique this message in light of Jesus’ teaching here?

- If you had to answer to God today for how you’ve related to wealth, what would you say? If you find yourself wishing you were able to give a better answer, what changes can you make, starting today, in how you relate to wealth?

3 Like the earlier episodes in the first phase of the journey to Jerusalem, these remaining episodes treat several other topics besides the overall theme of judgment. For example, Jesus explains how his coming will create conflict even within families; he heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath, arguing that it’s appropriate for her to be “set free on the Sabbath day”; he tells parables about seeds and yeast to show that the kingdom of God begins barely perceptibly but grows to have a great influence; and so forth.
Once again give people the opportunity to ask about, or comment on, aspects of particular episodes that they’d like the group to discuss together.

WHO WILL BE SAVED? NOT WHO YOU’RE EXPECTING . . .

INTRODUCTION

The journey to Jerusalem now enters its second phase, which Luke begins with another travel notice: “Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way [his journey] to Jerusalem.” The overall theme of the episodes in this phase is introduced by the first question Jesus is asked: “Are only a few people going to be saved?” In this phase of the journey, as Jesus interacts with those who question and challenge him, he corrects wrong assumptions about how to become part of the kingdom of God, and he reveals that the community of the kingdom will include many people that his listeners aren’t expecting it to.

READING

Have people take turns reading the following episodes:

• Jesus continues towards Jerusalem and answers a question about how many will be saved.
• Jesus responds to a warning about Herod and pleads with the city of Jerusalem.
• Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath in a Pharisee’s house, then he warns the guests not to pick the best places at the table, and he tells a parable about a great banquet.
• Jesus tells the crowds following him to consider the cost of being his disciple.
• In response to a complaint that he “welcomes sinners,” Jesus tells parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. (This last parable is known as the Prodigal Son.)
• Jesus tells another parable about a dishonest manager.
• The Pharisees sneer at Jesus, and he responds by warning them about their confidence in the Law and by telling a parable about a rich man and a beggar.
• Jesus instructs his disciples about forgiveness, faith, and duty.

DISCUSSION

1 In many of these episodes, Jesus teaches about being “saved,” that is, becoming part of the kingdom of God. He’s specifically asked how many will be saved, and his answers seem paradoxical. He says that “many . . . will try to enter and will not be able to,” but also that “people will come from east and west and north and south” to “take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.” Apparently fewer of the expected people will be saved, while many more unexpected people will be.

This raises the question that it seems Jesus really wants to answer: how can a person be saved, if it’s not by the means people are expecting? Jesus explains that it’s not enough to be part of the nation that the Messiah was sent to (“We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets”), or to have an invitation to the “feast in the kingdom of God,” if you don’t respond to it. What’s really required is repentance (as John the Baptist said from the start), illustrated here by the younger son in Jesus’ parable. He “came to his senses” and realized what wrong things he’d been doing, but he also recognized that he’d be forgiven and welcomed in his father’s house.

Have you had a “prodigal son moment,” when you “came to your senses” like this? Tell your story to the group if you’re comfortable doing so.

Divide your group into teams and have each team retell one of the following parables the way it would likely take place in your own culture:
• the great banquet
• the lost sheep
• the lost coin
• the lost son
• the rich man and the beggar
(Put your emphasis on the points Jesus wants to make about who will be saved or how to be saved.) Teams can either read aloud or act out their versions of these stories.

2 The Pharisees are expecting to be saved by keeping the law of Moses. Jesus explains that while the law is sufficient to point the way to God, if it’s understood and followed properly (“They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them”), a new era has actually begun in God’s relationship with people. “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached.” In other words, beginning with John the Baptist, the question is not whether a person has tried to keep the law, but whether they’ve accepted or ignored the invitation to become part of the kingdom.

Jesus says to the Pharisees, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts.” If the Pharisees were always trying to follow the rules, how did they get such bad hearts, which kept them from welcoming the kingdom? (To answer this question, draw on everything you’ve seen the Pharisees say and do to this point in Luke.)

3 As in the first phase of the journey, Jesus has much to say about wealth in this second phase. Earlier Jesus cautioned that we’ll have to answer
for how we’ve related to wealth. Now he warns that becoming too attached to wealth can actually keep us from being saved. “You cannot serve both God and money,” he insists. “Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.”

 wichtig Over the centuries many followers of Jesus have taken this last saying to mean that they should live in absolute poverty, having no possessions at all. Others have understood it to mean that they shouldn’t consider any of their possessions to be really their own, but rather “release” them to be used as needed for the kingdom. Whichever interpretation we follow, Jesus says that giving up everything is a condition of being his disciple. Have you relinquished your possessions? Design a ceremony to symbolize the transfer of all of your assets to God. If you later feel that God has taken you up on this by claiming an asset or the use of one, report this to the group.

 wichti Jesus tells a parable about a dishonest manager who provides for his future by using resources he’s just about to lose. Explain what each of the elements in this parable represents: the rich man, the manager, the money he’s handling, the debtors. Who corresponds to the “friends” that Jesus says we should use “worldly wealth” to gain, so that we will be “welcomed into eternal dwellings”? 

### RECEIVING OR REJECTING JESUS AND THE KINGDOM

**INTRODUCTION**

The third phase of the journey to Jerusalem begins with another travel notice: “Now on his way [as he journeyed] to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.” Once again an overall theme is introduced in the first episode. Jesus heals ten lepers, but only one returns to say thank you and praise God. Jesus wonders, “Where are the other nine?” This illustrates how the kingdom of God engages many people, but only some of them respond positively to it. How people respond to Jesus, whether by receiving him gladly or by rejecting him, will be the overall theme of this phase of the journey to Jerusalem.

**READING**

Have people take turns reading these episodes:

- Jesus heals ten lepers.
- Jesus teaches about the coming of the kingdom of God.
- Jesus tells a parable about a widow who keeps asking for justice.
- Jesus tells a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector who go to the temple to pray.
• Jesus welcomes little children.
• Jesus answers a ruler’s question about how to “inherit eternal life.”
• Jesus predicts his own sufferings and death.
• Jesus heals a blind man outside Jericho.
• Jesus stays with Zacchaeus in Jericho.
• Jesus tells a parable about a man who was appointed king.

DISCUSSION

1 Several people who meet Jesus in this phase of the journey model the ideal response to the kingdom of God. The blind man who’s sitting by the roadside near Jericho learns that “Jesus of Nazareth” is coming by. He must have already heard about Jesus and formed a conviction about him, because he addresses him by a different title: “Jesus, Son of David.” This man believes that Jesus is the Messiah. He also believes that Jesus is willing and able to help him, because he shouts out, “Have mercy on me!” It turns out he’s right about Jesus, because Jesus restores his sight and tells him, “Your faith has healed you.” He says literally, “Your faith has saved you”—exactly what he said to the woman who touched the fringe of his garment and to the woman with the alabaster jar of perfume. It’s also what he says, literally, to the one leper who returns to say thank you. And Jesus says the equivalent about Zacchaeus: “Today salvation has come to this house.”

The common pattern is that people take to heart what they’ve heard about Jesus and they form a conviction that makes them acknowledge him (“Master!” “Son of David!”). They take desperate measures to see him (shouting out or running ahead and climbing a tree). When they do encounter Jesus, they respond in gratitude, praise, and generosity. This trusting, eager faith is what Jesus is referring to when he says that “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

What aspects of the story of Jesus, as you’ve heard it to this point in Luke, are you taking to heart and reflecting on?

What name or title best expresses your current conviction about who Jesus is? If you would have earlier called Jesus something different, say what, and explain how you came to a different conviction about who he is.

2 Unfortunately, some people also reject the kingdom of God. The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable represents those who are “confident of their own righteousness” and so are not “justified before God” even when they pray about their own spiritual condition. Their pride keeps them from saying, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

The ruler who approaches Jesus also illustrates the wrong response to the kingdom. He asks exactly the same question as the expert in the law to whom Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” When Jesus cites five of the Ten Commandments as a summary of the law, this ruler insists he’s always been a law-keeper. But when Jesus challenges him to a total commitment expressed through complete generosity, the ruler sadly declines to enter the kingdom, “because he was very wealthy.” We see again that becoming too attached to wealth can actually keep us from being saved. We can’t fulfill the commandment to love our neighbor if we’re holding on too tightly to our possessions.

The first two servants in the parable about the man who was appointed king model the proper attitude towards possessions. Knowing that the money entrusted to them really isn’t theirs, they nevertheless “put this money to work” for their master’s benefit. The third servant models the wrong attitude: “I won’t work to gain any profit for my master if I’m not going to get anything out of it personally.” He has no place in his master’s kingdom in the end, just like those who said, “We don’t want this man to be our king.”

In your experience, what are the main reasons why people decline the invitation to become followers of Jesus?

Jesus tells the ruler, “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” But when Zacchaeus says, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor,” Jesus announces, “Today salvation has come to this house.” Why is one person challenged to give all while another is celebrated for giving half?
Some of the other episodes in this phase of the journey address the people’s expectation that “the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.” Jesus warns instead that “first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.” His return will be delayed to the point where most people will go back to business as usual, and they’ll be taken by surprise by his return. So his followers must be faithful in prayer, asking God to sustain and protect them, so that when Jesus returns, he will “find faith on the earth.”

If Jesus returns and finds no one in your society following him, what will be the main cause?

Pray together as a group for followers of Jesus around the world to remain faithful to him in the face of the challenges they each face in their own societies.

If Jesus returns and finds no one in your society following him, what will be the main cause?

Pray together as a group for followers of Jesus around the world to remain faithful to him in the face of the challenges they each face in their own societies.

INTRODUCTION

The fourth phase of the “journey to Jerusalem” in Luke actually extends into some of the time that Jesus spends in Jerusalem itself once he arrives there. The focus in this phase remains on the wisdom that Jesus displays as he continues to interact with people he meets, now in the temple where he’s teaching. Most of its episodes still begin with someone coming up to Jesus and asking a question or posing a challenge. Like the previous phases, this one starts with a travel notice that uses the same word for “journeying” as all the others: “After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead [journeyed ahead], going up to Jerusalem.”

Once again the overall theme of the phase is introduced in its opening episode. Jesus enters Jerusalem surrounded by crowds who celebrate him as the “king who comes in the name of the Lord.” This is a quotation from Psalm 118 that identifies Jesus as the Messiah. The Pharisees object to this identification and demand that Jesus silence the crowds. This renews the conflict over Jesus’ identity and authority, and it extends all through this phase and leads ultimately into the third major section of the book, where Jesus gives his life as the Savior of the world.
READING

Read the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Jesus
- The colt’s owners
- The two disciples
- The crowd
- Pharisees

Then take turns reading through the rest of the episodes in this phase, starting and ending with the two general summaries that begin, “Every day he [or ‘Each day Jesus’] was teaching at the temple . . .” Each person should read until they feel they’ve come to a natural break, such as a place where a new person asks Jesus a question or where Jesus begins a new topic in his teaching, and then let the next person take their turn.

DISCUSSION

1 By riding into Jerusalem on a humble colt, rather than on a war horse like the generals and conquerors of his day, Jesus is showing that the kingdom of God isn’t what the people are expecting. It’s not a political or military kingdom. Rather, it’s the spreading influence of the authority that God is asserting to bring about healing, liberation, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The colt itself is a resource that its owners have “released” for kingdom purposes. As soon as they’re told, “The Lord needs it,” they let it go.

⇒ Where do you see the influence of God’s authority spreading into your life and the world around you?

⇒ Does the Lord “need” something of yours right now?

2 Jesus’ identity and authority are explored and debated throughout these episodes. The Pharisees protest when the crowds greet him as the Messiah. Later they demand to know by what authority he teaches and does miracles. In his parable about the vineyard, Jesus identifies himself as God’s Son. The spies try to trick him into setting himself up against Caesar. The Sadducees try to expose him as someone who doesn’t really understand the implications of Moses’ teaching. And once he has silenced all of his opponents with his “astonishing” answers, Jesus perplexes them further with the paradox of his identity: he’s both David’s son (descendant), and his Lord.

⇒ If you wanted to explain to someone, by analogy, the role that Jesus came to play in our world, what individuals, living or historical, would you compare him to? (Granting, of course, that Jesus is also unlike any other person who’s ever lived, because of his divine origins and identity as the Messiah.)

⇒ Twice, when Jesus is asked a potentially inflammatory question (about his own authority and about paying taxes to Caesar), he answers with a question of his own. Why do you think Jesus answers a question with a question like this?

3 The dispute over Jesus’ identity leads to even sharper conflict with the religious leaders. Once again he denounces their greed and love of praise. He shows how the sacrificial giving of the poor puts to shame their pretensions to generosity. And he warns his disciples that the time is coming when Jerusalem will be destroyed and they will be persecuted and put on trial “on account of my name.” “Stand firm,” he urges them, “and you will win life” (literally, “Through your endurance you will win your souls”).

Much of what Jesus predicted here took place during the first Jewish-Roman war, which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70. Jesus was warning his followers not to stay and defend the city. However, some of what he foresaw, including his own return “with power and great glory,” still remains to be fulfilled. The exact timing and circumstances of his return will be impossible to know in advance, and so Jesus warns, “Watch out that you are not deceived.” Rather than trying to figure out when and how these things will happen, followers of Jesus should make sure that their hearts are not “weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life.” That way, whenever he returns, they will “be able to stand before the Son of Man” as servants who’ve been faithful and obedient to the end.
What would you like Jesus to find you doing when he returns?

Let each person reflect on these questions privately: Which of the following is most likely to make you unprepared for Jesus’ return: carousing (including excesses of all kinds), drunkenness (including any kind of “drug of choice” that’s an escape from reality and responsibility), or the anxieties of life? What changes can you make so that you can “stand firm” and “win life”? Close by praying together as a group that you will all remain faithful to Jesus, even in the face of difficulties and persecution.

SESSION 13

JESUS CELEBRATES THE PASSOVER WITH HIS DISCIPLES AND IS ARRESTED AND TRIED

Book of Luke > Third Section: In Jerusalem

INTRODUCTION

The last major section in Luke describes how Jesus gave his life in Jerusalem as the Savior of the world. The focus is no longer on his miracles or his teaching, but on the meaning and significance of his sufferings, death, and resurrection. Episodes are no longer introduced by questions people ask Jesus, but by references to place and time (“when the hour came,” “Jesus went . . . to the Mount of Olives,” “at daybreak”), as events lead inexorably to the climax of the story of Jesus at the cross and empty tomb.

The “travel notice” that begins this section of the book doesn’t refer to movement from place to place, but rather to movement through time: Luke says that the festival of Passover was approaching. Passover commemorated how God delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt through one last terrible plague. God struck down all the firstborn of the Egyptians, but he “passed over” the Israelites when they put the blood of sacrificed lambs on their doorposts, as he’d instructed. Against the backdrop of this festival, Jesus’ sufferings and death are recognized to be a sacrifice that God accepts on behalf of all those who trust in him.

This is the most important part of the story of Jesus to hear and take to heart. We’ll consider it in this session and the next.
READING

Read the first part of the story of Jesus’ sufferings, death, and resurrection. Begin where Luke says the Festival of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, and end where Pilate releases a different prisoner and surrenders Jesus to the will of his opponents. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Jesus
- Peter/Simon (can also speak the line shared with John)
- The disciples/Jesus’ followers
- People by the fire (a servant girl and two others)
- Council of elders
- Pilate
- The crowd

Because the narrator and Jesus have the longest parts, you may have different actors take these roles in different scenes: the Passover meal, at the Mount of Olives, and the trial.

DISCUSSION

1 Jesus shares the traditional Passover meal with his disciples, but he gives it a new significance. For his followers, it will now represent his death on their behalf (“my body given for you,” “my blood . . . poured out for you”). Jesus himself has become the Passover lamb, and he asks his followers to regularly observe this ceremonial meal, which is known today as communion, the Lord’s Supper, or the Eucharist, “in remembrance” of him.

Jesus uses the meal to teach a further spiritual truth. He’s been explaining the character and values of the kingdom of God, and he reinforces one of his lessons by personally serving this meal to his disciples, who are “reclining at the table” in keeping with the custom of the time. This illustrates that humility and service to others constitute true greatness in the kingdom of God.

- The Lord’s Supper is a continuing opportunity to “take to heart” what Jesus has done for us. If you’re part of a community of Jesus’ followers, share with the group how you observe this sacrament. What does the Lord’s Supper mean to you personally?

What are some of the most meaningful experiences you’ve had of the Lord’s Supper?

- Do you know someone you’d consider “great” by kingdom standards because they’re humble and serve others? Tell the group a little about this person.

- Perhaps to avoid arrest, Jesus has two of his disciples go undercover to prepare the Passover meal, using a prearranged signal to find the right house. Imagine how Jesus arranged with the owner for the use of the room, and re-create the conversation between them.

2 The dark spiritual forces that Jesus has been opposing throughout his ministry now close in on him. “This is your hour,” Jesus tells his captors, “when darkness reigns.”

Satan, the devil, “enters” Judas, one of the disciples, and leads him to betray Jesus to his enemies. Satan also asks (literally “demands”) to “sift” the disciples like wheat—that is, to sort out the wheat from the chaff, the genuine followers from the pretenders. The name Satan means “accuser,” and in the Bible, his role includes exposing people who aren’t genuine. Under this guise, Satan works to create situations that will exploit any tentativeness, insincerity, or bravado on the part of those who say they’re trying to follow God.

To oppose this evil spiritual onslaught, Jesus and his followers have only the weapon of prayer. But when used properly, this is an awesome weapon. Jesus wrestles in prayer until his sweat becomes like drops of blood, and he prevails and embraces his Father’s will. The disciples, however, fall asleep when they should be praying. “Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation,” Jesus urges them, but it’s too late. When Jesus is arrested, they fight when they shouldn’t, then they abandon and deny him.

- Judas turns out to be so insincere that the devil can just take him over. The other disciples waver back and forth. Peter, for example, boasts of his loyalty, then denies Jesus, then weeps bitterly over this denial. If the dark forces that are still aligned
against the kingdom of God tested your loyalty, what do you think would be the outcome? Explain.

a. I’m afraid I’d probably cave in at the first application of pressure.

b. I might lose some battles along the way, but I hope I’d be loyal in the end.

c. I honestly believe I would stand strong through prayer.

What’s the longest you think you could pray without falling asleep?

At Jesus’ trial, the religious and political leaders who’ve heard and seen a lot of him have the chance to ask him directly who he is. But because they haven’t properly taken to heart what they’ve heard, they still reach the wrong conclusions. (As Jesus says, “If I tell you, you will not believe me.”)

- When Jesus tells the council he’s the “Son of God,” they conclude that he “opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be . . . a king.”
- Pilate declares Jesus innocent three times but still consents to his execution.
- Herod has been “wanting to see him” because he’s “heard about him,” but what he’s really expecting is someone who will do a miracle on demand. Disappointed, he mocks and ridicules Jesus and joins forces with his other enemies.

What do you think keeps these leaders from recognizing Jesus’ identity, since they know at least as much of his story as anyone else?

JESUS IS EXECUTED ON A CROSS BUT THEN RISES FROM THE DEAD

INTRODUCTION

In the previous session you began reading and discussing the last major section in the book of Luke, which describes how Jesus gave his life in Jerusalem as the Savior of the world. In this session you’ll finish this section and the book as a whole.

READING

Read the rest of Luke out loud like a play, beginning where you left off last time, with people taking these parts:

- Narrator
- Jesus
- Rulers
- Soldiers
- First criminal
- Second criminal
- Centurion
- Angels at the tomb
- Cleopas and his friend
- The disciples
Once again, because the narrator and Jesus will have the longest parts, you may have different actors take these roles in different scenes: the crucifixion and burial, at the tomb, the trip to Emmaus, and back in Jerusalem.

DISCUSSION

1 Throughout Luke we’ve seen various people form opinions about Jesus based on what they’ve heard about him and how this compares with what they’re expecting God to do through the Messiah. We see several more people express their belief or disbelief in Jesus here at the end of the book.

💡 Put yourself in the place of one of these characters and explain, in your own words, how you reached the conviction about Jesus that you express in this passage: the rulers, the soldiers, the first criminal, the second criminal, the centurion, and Joseph of Arimathea. (If possible have at least one person in your group speak on behalf of each character.)

2 The “women who had come with Jesus from Galilee” observe his death and burial, and they bring spices to his tomb after the Sabbath to treat his body. But they’re met there by two angels who proclaim that he’s alive and remind them of what Jesus taught them back in Galilee. (When Jesus taught his disciples privately, these women were included.) They rush back to tell the others, but they don’t believe the women, even when Peter verifies that the tomb is empty.

💡 Why do you think these women are able to believe in Jesus’ resurrection so confidently that they immediately announce it to others, while “the Eleven” (the remaining apostles, minus Judas) think it’s “nonsense”?

3 For some reason, Cleopas and his friend are “kept from recognizing” Jesus when he first joins them on the road to Emmaus. But their hearts are nevertheless “burning within” as Jesus “opens the Scriptures” and explains that the Messiah had to suffer before entering his glory. Then, when he breaks the bread at the table, their “eyes are opened” and they recognize who he is. Later, back in Jerusalem, Jesus “opens the minds” of all the disciples to understand the Scriptures about himself.

💡 If you’re a follower of Jesus, can you remember a time when you had a “burning heart” whenever you heard or thought about him, even if your eyes or mind hadn’t yet been opened to recognize who he truly was? Is this a stage on the way to belief for some people? What do you think are the factors or agencies that open a person’s eyes and mind to recognize Jesus? Pray together as a group with anyone who wants to ask God to open their eyes to see Jesus more clearly.

4 Near the beginning of the book of Luke, John the Baptist comes “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Throughout the book, many episodes illustrate the meaning of repentance, forgiveness, and sin. Now, at the end of this book, Jesus says that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in [the Messiah’s] name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” This is what we’ll see happen in the book of Acts.

💡 Work together as a group to review what “repentance for the forgiveness of sins” means, drawing on what you’ve learned in your study of Luke. Define each of the key terms (repentance, forgiveness, sin). Which characters repent in the episodes you read for this session?

5 Crucifixion, a method of executing a person by nailing them to a cross, was invented by the Persians and developed further by the Romans as a means of making death as painful and prolonged as possible. This is the kind of death that Jesus was willing to undergo to save everyone who believes in him. His sacrifice and resurrection have transformed the cross, originally an instrument of ghastly torture, into a beloved symbol of hope, faith, and love.

💡 If you’re a follower of Jesus, what use do you make of the cross as a symbol of your faith?
What are some of your favorite songs about what Jesus did for us on the cross? Why are they your favorites? What songs do you know that describe Jesus’ death through the symbolism of the “Passover lamb,” as in Luke? Share the words to these songs, or sing them together as a group. If you have Internet access, you can watch videos of them online.
The book of Acts is the second part of Luke’s two-volume history of the community of Jesus’ followers. It describes how that community spread throughout the Roman Empire as it proclaimed the good news about Jesus to people of many different backgrounds, languages, and regions.

The overall shape of the book of Luke was a “journey to Jerusalem.” Acts is a “journey from Jerusalem” out into the rest of the empire and ultimately to its capital, Rome. The community begins as a small, Aramaic-speaking, Jewish group in Palestine. Within a generation, it becomes a vast, Greek-speaking, multiethnic community extending across the Mediterranean world of its day. As the community expands, it also undergoes transformation so it can break through the cultural, ethnic, linguistic, geographic, and theological barriers to its growth.

The book of Acts describes this expansion in six phases. In each phase, the community, catalyzed by the Holy Spirit, breaks through another significant barrier. Luke summarizes each phase with a statement like, “And the word of God grew and multiplied.” As you read through Acts together in this session, listen for these summaries and watch the development of the community of Jesus’ followers.
OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

• In the first phase, the community is established in Jerusalem. It breaks through a linguistic barrier by becoming Greek-speaking, enabling it to communicate the good news about Jesus in the common language of the empire. (You'll discuss this phase of the book in sessions 16 and 17.)

• In the second phase (sessions 18 and 19), the community breaks through a first geographic barrier, expanding into the rest of Palestine and sending offshoots into Syria and Ethiopia.

• In the third phase (session 20), the community breaks through an ethnic and religious barrier as it begins to welcome Gentiles (non-Jews).

• In the fourth phase (session 21), the community breaks through a second geographic barrier as it sends messengers out beyond the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. It now needs to make a theological breakthrough as well. How can a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles be the culmination of God’s historic relationship with the people of Israel?

• In the fifth phase (session 22), these messengers break a third geographic barrier and bring the good news about Jesus into Greece, a key intellectual and cultural center.

• In the sixth and final phase (sessions 23–26), the community breaks a class and status barrier as it reaches all the way to the capital of Rome and into the highest levels of society. But this is accomplished paradoxically when one of its leading teachers, Paul, is brought to Rome as a prisoner.

READING

As a group, take turns reading through Acts out loud together, the same way you read Luke. This should take about two hours. The group can take a short break in the middle if it would like, perhaps after the third phase (which ends, memorably, with King Herod being eaten by worms and dying).

Acts is on pages ****–**** in the NIV edition of The Books of The Bible. If you're using another edition of the Scriptures, you can find Acts in the Table of Contents. (It probably won’t be right after Luke, but after the book of John, which traditional Bibles place between the two halves of Luke’s history.)

As you read, you can follow how the overall story is unfolding by looking at the outline above, and you can find the places it mentions on the maps on pages 72, 100, 106, 112, and 125.

Note how Luke says “we” and “us” in some parts of the book, indicating that he was actually traveling with Paul at those points.

DISCUSSION

 Which episode in Acts did you most enjoy hearing or find most memorable? Why?

 Who was your favorite character? Why?

 In one sentence, how would you summarize the role of the Holy Spirit in the book?

 How much is the community of Jesus’ followers today like the community described in Acts? How would you account for any differences? What’s one thing you’d like to see followers of Jesus do today to become more like the ones in Acts?
Luke begins the second volume of his history of the community of Jesus’ followers with another dedication to his friend Theophilus. In this dedication, Luke reviews the key events at the end of his previous volume that lead directly into this sequel, including Jesus’ ascension into heaven and his promise that the disciples will receive “power from on high” so they can take the good news about him “to the ends of the earth.” This promise is then fulfilled in the events that unfold as Luke resumes the story and tells how the community grew and spread.

In this session and the next, we’ll look at the first phase of the community’s expansion, which takes place within the city of Jerusalem. (The summary statement at the end of this phase says that “the word of God spread” and that the “number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly.”) But even as the community is establishing its base in this city, God begins equipping it to move out into the surrounding areas with the good news about Jesus.
READING

Read the first part of this phase in Acts, beginning with the dedication to Theophilus and ending where Luke describes how the followers of Jesus lived joyfully together, “praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people” as “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Jesus
- Disciples (spokesperson)
- Angels
- Peter
- Joel (in quotation)
- David (in two quotations)
- The crowd (spokesperson)

You can see the places where the Pentecost crowd came from by looking at the map on page 76.

DISCUSSION

1. The community of Jesus’ followers is made up of “about a hundred and twenty” people at this point. It includes the eleven remaining apostles; “the women” (that is, the ones who “had come with Jesus from Galilee”); Jesus’ mother and brothers; and apparently some others who joined the group traveling with Jesus at various points in his ministry. (Recall, for example, how he challenged several people to “follow me” when he left Galilee for Jerusalem.)

   The community is “constantly in prayer” and feels led to choose another apostle to replace Judas. They identify two men who witnessed everything “from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us,” and one of them, Matthias, is chosen by lot and “added to the eleven apostles.”

   ✝ What do you think it was like for the close group of Jesus’ early followers to discover that one of their own leaders, Judas, had betrayed Jesus to his enemies and then killed himself? What challenges do you think Matthias and the other apostles faced as they tried to restore the community’s confidence in its leadership and become a cohesive team? If your own community has gone through an experience similar to this, when a leader has betrayed the community’s confidence and had to be replaced, share with the group what it was like.

2. John told the crowds that he baptized with water, but someone would come after him who would baptize them “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Just before Jesus ascends to heaven here, he tells his disciples, “John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” These predictions are fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (a Jewish festival fifty days after Passover that celebrated the first fruits of the harvest). The Holy Spirit descends from heaven with the sound of a “violent wind” and fills each of the disciples, as flames of fire flare above their heads. From now on they’ll have inner spiritual strength and power to spread the good news about Jesus in the face of all obstacles.

   ✝ Are followers of Jesus today still supposed to be “baptized with the Holy Spirit”? If so, what should this look like? How can a person know whether they’ve been baptized with the Holy Spirit if they don’t experience flames of fire and the sound of a violent wind from heaven?

3. The Holy Spirit empowers the disciples to perform a remarkable sign. It authenticates their message about Jesus’ resurrection to the great crowd of pilgrims that has come to Jerusalem from all over the empire for the festival of Pentecost. Even though the disciples are all from Galilee, they’re able to “declare the wonders of God” in the native languages of each of these pilgrims. This represents an undoing of the curse of Babel, described in the book of Genesis, when differing human languages became a source of division and conflict. Now, through faith in the resurrected Jesus, people of all different backgrounds will be drawn into a single community.

   Convinced by this sign that Jesus has truly been raised from the dead and has “poured out” what they “see and hear,” the crowds ask, “What shall we do?” Peter presents the same challenge as John the Baptist: they must repent.
and symbolize this by receiving baptism for the forgiveness of their sins. And just as John warned the crowds to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” by sharing with those in need, the new followers of Jesus sell their “property and possessions” and give to everyone who’s in need.

ließ If you’re a follower of Jesus, what was the clearest demonstration that he is alive and powerful that helped convince you to believe in him?

ließ Have you ever been challenged in a community of Jesus’ followers to sell your possessions, or put off buying new ones, to help care for those in need? If so, tell the group about this challenge and how people responded to it. Give yourselves a challenge now, as a small group or as a church, to sell some of your possessions and give the proceeds to help the poor.

Besides authenticating the message about the resurrection, the sign of the disciples speaking different languages also symbolizes how the good news about Jesus will soon be brought to all the regions represented at the festival. But for this to happen, the followers of Jesus can’t be confined to an Aramaic-speaking community. They’ll need to speak Greek so their message can be widely understood. We’ll see the community break this linguistic barrier in our next session. The breakthrough is foreshadowed here, as the good news about Jesus reaches each of the pilgrims in their own language.

ließ How does your own community of Jesus’ followers need to be transformed to reach out more effectively to the people around it?

Besides the remarkable sign of the disciples speaking many different languages, Peter speaks to the crowds and offers a second authentication of the message about Jesus. He explains how the outpouring of the Spirit and Jesus’ resurrection and ascension fulfill what Joel and David, as prophets, foresaw and described in their writings. (Beyond the powerful things Jesus himself did, he offered this same kind of authentication for his own ministry.

For example, in the synagogue in Nazareth, he announced that he was fulfilling one of Isaiah’s prophecies.)

The premise behind Peter’s argument is that God’s activity in the present can be recognized because it’s consistent with the things God has done and the plans and purposes God has expressed in the past, as they have been recorded in the Scriptures. The Scriptural record, in other words, can be used to evaluate and authenticate things that are done today in the name of God.

ließ Do you feel that you know the written story of God (and not just individual sayings or episodes within it) well enough to make informed judgments about whether specific beliefs and practices are consistent with it? Do you feel you’ve seen the Bible misused at times to support things that don’t reflect God’s purposes and character? How can a person tell the difference between the misuse and the proper use of the Bible?
INTRODUCTION

As the community of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem joyfully pursues its shared life of worship and generosity, a series of events propels it into conflict with the city’s religious and political leaders. But despite their threats and attacks, the apostles keep proclaiming the good news about Jesus, and God authenticates their message with powerful signs. By the end of this phase of Acts, even these hostile leaders acknowledge how far the message has spread in only a short time. They admit, “You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching.”

READING

Take turns reading, one paragraph each, through the rest of this phase of Acts, beginning where you left off last time and ending with Luke’s summary (which comes after the community chooses seven men to oversee the daily food distribution): “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”

DISCUSSION

1. The conflict with the city’s leaders begins innocently enough. Peter and John are simply going to the temple to pray, as Jesus’ followers do regularly at this time. But when they heal a lame man and credit his healing to “faith in the name of Jesus,” the priests and temple guard and Sadducees come and arrest them. The Sadducees, who believe there is no resurrection, are “greatly disturbed” that Peter and John are saying Jesus has the power and authority to heal because “God raised him from the dead.”

   The religious leaders realize they can’t deny this miraculous healing, so they try to intimidate the apostles with threats instead. They order them “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” But in response, the believers pray for “great boldness” and ask God to “perform signs and wonders” to demonstrate that Jesus is truly alive. These signs lead to another arrest, a miraculous release, a re-arrest, and a beating. But the apostles “never stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.” This conflict will continue and escalate as Acts progresses.

   ⚫ What would be the consequences in your culture of proclaiming that Jesus is risen from the dead? What prevailing religious or ideological beliefs would this challenge? What authorities would try to discredit, threaten, or punish you? Do you believe that God would give you boldness and authenticate your message with powerful signs if you made this proclamation?

   ⚫ Have you or your community ever been driven to desperate prayer when simple obedience led you into unexpected opposition? If so, share the story with the group. What happened in the end?

2. In his speech to the crowd in the temple and in his reply to the religious leaders, Peter once again appeals to the written words of the prophets to authenticate the message about Jesus. One thing he wants to show is that Jesus’ sufferings, death, and resurrection are a vital element of his identity as the Messiah. “This is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets,” Peter explains, “saying that his Messiah would suffer.” The people
were expecting the Messiah to come in triumph and glory, but the path to this glory had to pass first through the grave.

Another thing Peter wants to show is that a new reality is breaking into this world. “Times of refreshing” are coming, when God will “restore everything.” “All the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days,” Peter insists. But to experience these “times,” people must “repent” and “turn to God.” They must “save themselves from this corrupt generation” (literally this “crooked” generation, meaning one that has left the right path). The idea of a kingdom of God, suggesting a territorial realm, is one way of envisioning the expanding sphere of God’s influence and uncontested authority. But here Peter describes it in a different way, speaking of it as a “time” that is coming, as a different “generation” that people can become part of.

If you could live in a generation other than the one you were born into, which one would you pick? What about life in this generation appeals to you? How would your life be different in practical ways (clothing, music, technology, social roles, etc.)? How are this generation’s values and view of the world different from your generation’s?

What would it look like for you to take on now, within your own generation and culture, the values and character of a great generation that you can envision being born sometime in the future? Does this analogy help you conceptualize the reign of God better? (In this context, how you envision this great generation may reveal your current understanding of what life in the reign of God will be like when it fully arrives. And even though you’ve been asked to picture it in the future, it isn’t exclusively future. The reign of God has already begun to arrive, as Jesus’ followers live out its values and character qualities right now, empowered by the Holy Spirit.)

The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira are an exceptional example of instantaneous divine judgment. Just as not every sick person is now healed, as a rule, so not every case of theft and deception cloaked with hypocritical piety is immediately exposed and punished today. But here in Acts, where the community is praying fervently for God to “perform signs and wonders,” exceptional acts of both mercy and judgment are occurring. Both types of intervention reflect the character of God, and both bring greater respect for the name of Jesus.

Have you ever seen or heard about anything close to what happens to Ananias and Sapphira here? What impact did this have on you and others?

This phase of Acts begins and ends with the issues of leadership and language. At the start of this phase, the community’s understanding is that it needs to be led by twelve apostles. While the miracle of Pentecost symbolizes how its witness will extend to people of all languages, its representatives still largely speak Aramaic, a language that isn’t widely understood in the Roman Empire. The phase ends with an episode that changes both of these things.

A minority group in the community complains that its widows are being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. This is happening because the “Hebraic” (Aramaic-speaking) Jews who are leading the community can’t talk to these “Hellenistic” (Greek-speaking) members to find out what their needs are. In response, the apostles tell the community to appoint “seven men . . . known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” to oversee the distribution. The community identifies seven wise, Spirit-filled men who are able to make sure everyone’s needs are met. They all turn out to have Greek names, suggesting that they’re Greek-speaking. As we’ll see in the following sessions, their new responsibilities soon bring them into wider roles proclaiming the good news about Jesus to the Greek-speaking people around them.

So in this episode, to address a potentially serious conflict, the community wisely makes a change in the structure and makeup of its leadership. In the process, it also breaks through a language barrier and becomes able to share the good news about Jesus much more widely.

What do you think of the following statement? “Looming conflict is a sign that change is needed and that things can be
The religious leaders try to make the apostles stop speaking about Jesus.

changed for the better.” Share the experiences you’ve had that lead you to respond to this statement the way you do.

SESSION 18

STEPHEN SPEAKS POWERFULLY ABOUT JESUS IN THE SYNAGOGUES AND BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

INTRODUCTION

The next phase of Acts describes how the community of Jesus’ followers broke through a geographic barrier and expanded out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. This happens primarily through the influence of two of the community’s new leaders, Stephen and Philip. We’ll look at Stephen’s story in this session and Philip’s story in the next session.

READING

Read the story of Stephen, beginning where he’s introduced as “a man full of God’s grace and power” and ending where a “great persecution” breaks out against the church and men and women are dragged off to prison. Have people take these parts:

• Narrator
• False witnesses
• High priest
• Stephen

Book of Acts > Second Phase: In Judea and Samaria
The person who portrays Stephen will do most of the talking, so choose someone for this role who’s comfortable reading a long part and has good dramatic expression.

**DISCUSSION**

1. Through Stephen, the good news about Jesus now reaches into wider and wider circles. Jews who’ve come to Jerusalem from other parts of the empire begin to discuss and debate (“argue”) with him in their synagogue. They’re from the cities of Cyrene in North Africa and Alexandria in Egypt, and from the Roman provinces of Cilicia and Asia (in modern-day Turkey). All of these people are likely Greek-speaking. If Stephen can help them to follow Jesus, they may tell their friends and relatives back home about Jesus in turn. When the disciples spoke many different languages on the day of Pentecost, this demonstrated how these distant regions would one day be reached with the good news, and it seems this is now beginning to happen.

   "You’re a Jew who’s moved to Jerusalem from another part of the empire. You belong to a synagogue that’s made up mostly of people from your home region. You’ve heard a little about Jesus, but the details have been vague and secondhand. But now someone brings Stephen into your synagogue, and in the Greek language you’re familiar with, he makes powerful arguments that Jesus is the Messiah. He backs them up with “wonders and signs.” What’s this experience like for you? Does it change the way you think about Jesus and his relevance to people like you? What experiences similar to this might people have today?"

2. Unfortunately, Stephen’s opponents, unable to “stand up against the wisdom” the Spirit gives him, accuse him falsely of blasphemy. He’s brought before the Sanhedrin, Israel’s ruling council, and the high priest asks him whether he really teaches that “Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this [temple] and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

   “You are just like your ancestors,” he concludes, “you always resist the Holy Spirit!” Infuriated by this accusation and by Stephen’s vision of Jesus in his glory, the council drags him out of the city and stones him to death.

   Stephen was retelling the story of Israel’s relationship with God so his listeners could recognize the role they were playing within this ongoing story and, ideally, take on a better part. Unfortunately, the Sanhedrin continues the role of opposing God’s messengers. It adds another chapter to the story of resistance by killing this latest messenger. But Stephen himself carries the story of Jesus forward, praying as he dies, as Jesus did on the cross, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

   "What role have you been playing within the ongoing story of God? Which figures in the story as Stephen tells it here, or as you know it generally, do you most closely correspond with? What chapter have you been adding through your life and actions and to which part of the story? Would you like your role to be any different?"

   "If God offered you the close-knit community and miraculous signs you read about in Acts, but this came with the likelihood that you could be beaten or murdered for your faith, would you accept? Why or why not?"

3. When the council executes Stephen, the community of Jesus’ followers loses a dynamic leader to a violent and unjust death. This action also triggers a “great persecution” against the entire community. But the eventual result is a significant expansion of the community in size, extent, and influence. Luke describes how, because of this persecution, “all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” As we’ll see next time, “those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went,” so that by the end of this phase of the book, the community is no longer described as...
Have you seen or heard of a community of Jesus’ followers today growing larger and stronger as a result of persecution? If so, tell their story to your group. How does persecution affect the spread of the good news about Jesus: does it generally hinder it or help it? Would you say that it’s sometimes even necessary? Are the benefits worth the high price that’s paid?

Which of these statements do you agree with more? Why?

a. Stephen had a greater impact in death than he ever could have had in life.
b. Stephen would have had a greater impact if he’d lived.

INTRODUCTION

After Stephen’s death the followers of Jesus are driven out of Jerusalem by persecution. Scattered throughout Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, they “preach the word” wherever they go. Luke follows another of the community’s new leaders, Philip (a different person from the apostle by the same name), as he proclaims the good news about Jesus in Samaria and to an important official from the ancient African kingdom of Ethiopia.

In this phase of the book Luke also tells us what happens to Saul, the man who’s been leading the persecution in Jerusalem. Saul travels to Damascus to hunt for followers of Jesus. But on the way there, he has a dramatic encounter that changes the course of his life and sets the stage for even greater expansion of the community in the future.

READING

Read the rest of this phase of Acts, beginning where you left off last time and ending with the summary that tells how the church “enjoyed a time of peace” and “increased in numbers.” Have people take these parts:
Philip spreads the Good News; Jesus appears to Saul at Damascus

1

Jews and Samaritans were closely related and basically shared the same faith, but because of differences in their bloodlines and in some of their specific religious practices, there was longstanding hostility between them. (Recall how a Samaritan village denied Jesus hospitality on his way to Jerusalem and his disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy it.) But when Philip proclaims Jesus as the Messiah in a city in Samaria, all the people believe and are baptized. Even so, they don’t receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John come from Jerusalem and place their hands on them. Physical contact like this is a sign that hostility has ended. God was apparently waiting to send the Holy Spirit until the apostles came and demonstrated publicly that in the community of Jesus’ followers, there would be no hostility between Jews and Samaritans. These former enemies would now be brothers and sisters.

In your culture, what forms of physical contact serve as signs of peace and good will between friends and are avoided between enemies? If some members of your group are unfamiliar with your cultural customs, demonstrate them.

“This episode illustrates that the Holy Spirit won’t be present in a community of Jesus’ followers if there’s hostility among them.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?

2

Simon has kept these Samaritans under his spell “for a long time with his sorcery.” But through the “great signs and miracles” that Philip does, everyone, including Simon, believes in Jesus as the Messiah, and Simon is no longer regarded as “the Great Power of God.”

Who or what is keeping the people around you under its spell? How should the good news about Jesus be presented in order to expose this person or thing as a pretender?

Luke leaves off Simon’s story with his soul in danger. (“May your money perish with you” means “I can see that you’re heading for destruction, and you can take your money with you!”) How do you think Simon’s story turned out in the end?

3

The Spirit directs Philip to leave the crowds in Samaria who are believing in Jesus and go to the middle of nowhere, to a “desert road.” But there he intercepts the chariot of an Ethiopian official. He’s a God-fearer, one of many Gentiles in the empire who haven’t converted to Judaism but who study the Hebrew Scriptures and come to worship God at the Jerusalem temple. Beginning with the passage in Isaiah that the official is reading, Philip tells him the good news about Jesus. He believes and is baptized. The community has its first Gentile member, in anticipation of the breakthrough it will make in the next phase of Acts.

Do you know, or have you heard of, people who were sincerely seeking God with the light they had, who were introduced to Jesus through unusual circumstances like these? If so, tell their story.

4

Saul, who’s leading the persecution against followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, travels all the way to Damascus in Syria to try to stamp out the community of Jesus’ followers there. But on the way, Jesus appears to him
personally, demonstrating that he’s genuinely alive. Saul becomes another
dynamic representative of the community, in Damascus and to the Hellenistic
(Greek-speaking) Jews in Jerusalem. As this part of his story ends, for his own
safety, Saul has to return to his home city of Tarsus in Cilicia, but he’ll be a
key figure later in Acts. We’ll hear him describe this encounter with Jesus on
the Damascus Road several times in greater detail.

✪ Of all the things that Jesus could do to help Saul recognize
he shouldn’t be persecuting his followers, why do you think Jesus
strikes him with blindness? Why does Ananias place his hands
on Saul?

✪ Retell this story from Ananias’s perspective, beginning when
you first hear that Saul is coming from Jerusalem to your city. What
measures do you take to avoid capture? How do you know that
your dream about Saul is really from God? How do you feel as
you approach “the house of Judas on Straight Street”? Why do
you decide to address Saul as your “brother”? How do you feel
about placing your hands on this man who has imprisoned and
killed so many of your fellow believers? How do the other disciples
respond when you introduce him to them? End the story with the
thoughts you have as you’re heading back to your house after
helping Saul escape from Damascus through an opening in the
city wall.

A ROMAN CENTURION INVITES PETER TO
COME AND TELL ABOUT JESUS

INTRODUCTION

In the next phase of Acts, the community breaks through an ethnic and
religious barrier as it recognizes that God wants it to welcome Gentiles as
well as Jews. Some Gentiles are being brought in incidentally (such as the
Ethiopian official that Philip spoke with and the Greeks in Antioch who are
mentioned in this phase), but the community needs to realize that it should
bring the good news about Jesus to them intentionally. This will require a
transformation in its thinking, since its Jewish members consider Gentiles
“unclean.” God brings the apostle Peter, a key leader of the community,
through a vivid experience that convinces him and everyone who hears about
it that they should bring the good news about Jesus “even to Gentiles.”

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Read the story of Peter’s experiences in Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea,
and his report to the believers back in Jerusalem. Have people take
these parts:
A. Peter first traveled outside Jerusalem to welcome the new believers in Samaria. This trip may have shown how valuable it was for the apostles to go to other places and encourage the believers there. Peter now goes to Lydda and Joppa and does miracles that lead many people in both cities to “turn to the Lord.”

If you’re part of a community of Jesus’ followers, have you had leaders from other places visit you for special times of teaching, healing, or encouragement? Have your own leaders gone out to other communities to help them? If so, describe one or two of the best things you think have come out of these experiences.

B. Simply to accompany Cornelius’s messengers back to his house, Peter needs to accept that it’s all right for him to do something he’s never done before and has always considered wrong. “It is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile,” he explains. So the Holy Spirit directs him in some extraordinary ways.

Look back over this story and identify the things the Holy Spirit does to propel Peter, and the community with him, through this ethnic and religious barrier. (Once you’ve made your list, you can compare it with the suggestions at the end of this session.)

Think about the previous two barriers the community has broken through, the language barrier (to speakers of Greek) and the geographic barrier (to Judea, Samaria, and Galilee). What does the Holy Spirit do to propel the community through these barriers or to show them that they truly belong on the other side of them?

C. After hearing Peter’s story, all the believers back in Jerusalem agree that “even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.” The challenge that’s presented throughout Luke–Acts is for people to repent (change the way they’re living) to show that they want to be part of what God is doing through the Messiah and so find forgiveness. Cornelius, however, seems to repent ahead of time, even before he hears about Jesus. He’s a “God-fearer” like the Ethiopian official. The angel tells him, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.” In other words, God is pleased with his devotion and generosity and so is making special arrangements for him to hear about Jesus. God providentially leads Peter to Joppa, where he’s only a day’s journey from Caesarea and Cornelius’s messengers can reach him easily.

Does Cornelius’s experience here challenge the idea that God doesn’t care about any good works we might do before we come to know Jesus?

Have someone read the description of how “those who had been scattered by the persecution” started a large community of Jesus’ followers in Antioch, how Barnabas and Saul taught this community, and how it sent famine relief to the believers in Judea. Antioch will be the springboard for an even greater expansion in the next phase of Acts.

Luke notes that “the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” (Elsewhere in Luke–Acts they’re referred to as “the Way.”) If you asked the people around you who aren’t followers of Jesus what a “Christian” is, what would they say? Would this be an accurate description of what you believe and how you live? Would some other term be more accurate in your culture? Is it all right to use different terms, or should followers of Jesus always identify themselves as “Christians” and work to explain and live out the real meaning of that name?
Finally, have someone read the rest of this phase of Acts, ending with Luke’s summary: “But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.”

To this point all followers of Jesus “except the apostles” have been targets of persecution. But now Herod goes after the apostles themselves. He kills James, one of the three disciples who was closest to Jesus and witnessed the most significant events of his ministry (such as his glorification on the mountaintop). Herod apparently executes James so abruptly that the church has no time to respond. He next targets Peter, another of the three key apostolic witnesses. But he delays Peter’s execution until after the Passover festival, giving the church time to “earnestly pray to God for him.” The weapon of prayer once again proves powerful and effective. Peter miraculously escapes from prison, and shortly afterwards Herod himself is dead.

For purposes we can’t entirely understand, God permits invaluable leaders like Stephen and James to be killed, but he also gives the community the opportunity to plead for the deliverance of others like Peter. Peter’s release seems so improbable that at first the praying church doesn’t believe it even when it happens. What imprisoned and endangered leaders does your group know about, or can find out about, whose deliverance you can pray for, improbable as it may seem? Resolve to pray for at least one particular leader at the rest of your meetings, and follow their case to see how it’s developing.

Suggested list of things the Holy Spirit does to direct Peter:

• The Spirit speaks to Peter in a vision that uses non-kosher foods to symbolize the Gentiles, signifying that God has made them “clean.”
• The vision is repeated three times, just as three men arrive to bring Peter to Cornelius.
• The Spirit tells Peter to go with these men.

• Before Peter finishes speaking to Cornelius and his guests, the Spirit comes on them and reproduces the same miracle that he did on the day of Pentecost, showing Peter definitively that they belong in the community of believers that will be gathered from all over the world.
THE ANTIOCH CHURCH SENDS PAUL AND BARNABAS OUT TO PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS

INTRODUCTION

In the next phase of Acts, the community breaks through another geographic barrier. To this point, it has been largely confined to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. But now, directed by the Holy Spirit, the church in Antioch sends two messengers out to establish communities of Jesus’ followers in other parts of the empire. Barnabas and Saul (also known as Paul) sail west to the island of Cyprus, then travel to several cities in central Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), bringing Jews and Gentiles to faith in Jesus everywhere they go.

When they return, they’re challenged by some believers who insist that Gentiles need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. The Antioch church sends them to Jerusalem to take this question up with the apostles and elders. The debate there, and the decision that’s finally reached, enable the community to take a stance firmly on the other side of the religious barrier it crossed in the previous phase of Acts.

PAUL’S JOURNEYS IN THE FOURTH PHASE OF ACTS

Book of Acts > Fourth Phase: Out into the Empire
READING AND DISCUSSION

Have someone read the short description of how Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch from Jerusalem and were sent out for the work the Holy Spirit was calling them to. Then have different people read what happens to Paul and Barnabas in the following places:

- Salamis
- Paphos
- Perga in Pamphylia
- Pisidian Antioch
- Iconium
- Lystra
- Derbe and the return to Antioch in Syria

Some of these episodes will be longer; others quite short. You can follow the journeys that Paul takes in this phase of the book on the map on page 100.

A. Throughout Luke–Acts, the message of Jesus and the apostles is authenticated by powerful signs of healing and liberation. But occasionally it’s also authenticated, and people come to faith, when affliction and death serve as signs of God’s judgment against unbelief and hardened hearts. For example, Ananias and Sapphira fall down dead; Saul is struck blind at Damascus; Herod is “eaten by worms” and dies. Elymas the sorcerer is similarly struck blind at Paphos when he tries to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

How does Paul know that this occasion in Paphos is right for a miracle of “anti-healing”? (What information does Luke provide in the story itself?) Should followers of Jesus expect that they might be used to deliver signs of judgment on occasion, when people resist the kingdom themselves and try to turn others away from it? How can believers keep from calling for judgment inappropriately (such as when James and John wanted fire to fall from heaven on the Samaritan village)?

B. At Pisidian Antioch Paul speaks in the synagogue to a group of Jews and “God-fearing” Gentiles. He retells the story of Israel’s relationship with God, as Stephen did to the Sanhedrin, so his listeners can find their proper place in it. Paul invites them to receive “forgiveness of sins” by believing in Jesus, and he warns them, in the words of the prophets, not to take on the role of a “scoffer” who doesn’t believe even when someone tells them the good news.

There’s no synagogue in Lystra. Instead, there’s a temple of Zeus. But Paul still tells the people there the story of God, beginning in this case with how God created the world and gave a “testimony” about his goodness by providing rain and crops. Once again he stresses the choice his listeners must make, urging them to turn from “worthless things” and worship the “living God.”

How would you retell the story of God’s relationship with humanity for the people of your own culture? Where would you begin, and what people and events would you include? What proper and improper responses would you illustrate, and how? Why do you think Paul begins the story so far back, with Abraham and Moses in Antioch, and with the creation in Lystra, instead of just telling the people about Jesus?

C. Paul and Barnabas are expelled from Pisidian Antioch, they flee a murderous plot in Iconium, and Paul is stoned and left for dead in Lystra. Nevertheless they return to each of these cities to encourage the disciples to “remain true to the faith,” telling them, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”

If a friend of yours was considering becoming a follower of Jesus, what hardships would you tell them they needed to be prepared to face?

2 Read Luke’s description of how the dispute was settled about whether Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the law. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
THE ANTIOCH CHURCH SENDS PAUL AND BARNABAS OUT TO PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS

Advocates of Gentile law-keeping
- Peter
- James (a brother of Jesus who’s an important leader in Jerusalem)
- The letter

End where Luke says that Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching.

After much debate, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem conclude that Gentiles don’t need to follow Jewish religious practices in order to become followers of Jesus. This position, they decide, is authenticated by the way God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles, showing he had “purified their hearts by faith,” and also by the words of the prophets, who foretold that “the rest of mankind” would “seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles.” The apostles and elders identify only a few Jewish practices that it “seems good” to them to ask the Gentiles to observe.

In today’s world most followers of Jesus have adopted a Christian cultural and religious identity. But if it’s not necessary for a person to do this completely, are there certain minimum Christian practices that followers of Jesus who have different cultural and religious identities should be encouraged to maintain? If so, which ones, and why?

Finally, have someone read the story of what happens when Paul asks Barnabas to revisit with him the places where they “preached the word of the Lord.” End with the summary that concludes this phase of Acts: “So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.”

Which of the following positions do you agree with most?
Discuss the options as a group, with each person defending the position they prefer.

a. Barnabas was right to want to give John Mark another chance.
b. Paul was right not to want to bring John Mark along because he’d abandoned them the first time.
c. John Mark put these two men in a no-win situation when he returned home from Pamphylia.
d. Paul and Barnabas were both right, and God used their difference in perspective to create two teams of messengers instead of one.
PAUL’S JOURNEYS IN THE FIFTH PHASE OF ACTS

INTRODUCTION

The entire second half of Acts is devoted to the journeys that Paul and his companions take to share the good news about Jesus. But these journeys don’t line up exactly with the phases of the book that are marked off by Luke’s summaries. Instead, in the fourth phase, as we saw last time, Paul takes a first journey and then begins a second. In this fifth phase, he completes that second journey and goes on a third. This phase actually ends with him in mid-journey, in the city of Ephesus. Luke’s purpose is clearly not to record the “acts” of apostles such as Peter, Philip, and Paul (as the book’s traditional title suggests), but rather to describe how the community of Jesus’ followers breaks through specific barriers in order to grow and multiply.

In this phase the barrier is once again geographic. Paul and his companions have already been proclaiming the good news about Jesus beyond the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. But they’ve stayed within the various Roman provinces in Asia Minor. This is home territory for Paul, since he’s from the city of Tarsus in the province of Cilicia. But when he and his companions on this second journey travel all through Asia Minor and the Spirit doesn’t allow them to “preach the word” anywhere, they arrive at Troas on the western coast, and Paul has a vision that shows them God is calling them into Greece.
This is a strategic cultural and intellectual center within the empire. Even though the Romans are the political and military rulers, Greek language, culture, and philosophy still predominate. If the community can expand into the Greek provinces of Macedonia and Achaia, it can begin to influence the leading cultural and intellectual currents of the day. And so Paul and his companions cross into this unfamiliar but promising territory.

**Reading**

Take turns reading through this fifth phase of Acts, beginning where you finished last time and ending with Luke’s next summary, “In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.” (It comes right after some new believers in Ephesus burn their magic scrolls.) Each person should read until they come to what feels like a natural break, such as the end of a short episode or a transition within a longer episode, and then let the next person take their turn. (Note how Luke says “we” and “us” in Troas and Philippi, showing that he traveled with Paul to those places.) You can follow the journeys that Paul takes in this phase of the book on the map on page 106.

**Discussion**

1. Paul and his companions are launched into new territory by a combination of frustration and renewed vision. Their efforts to “preach the word” in Asia Minor are repeatedly thwarted by God himself. But when it seems there’s nowhere left for them to work, God speaks to Paul in a dream, calling him and his team to take on a more strategic challenge than they’ve yet imagined.

   - Luke says that the Holy Spirit “kept” these messengers from preaching in Asia and that the “Spirit of Jesus would not allow them” to go into Bithynia. How do you think this happened, specifically, and how did Paul and his companions know God was behind it?

2. Even though he’s no longer in familiar territory, Paul still has many assets he can draw on. In cities where there is no synagogue, or where the synagogue proves hostile, God provides other places to serve as Paul’s bases of operations (Lydia’s house in Philippi, the house of Titius Justus in Corinth, and the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus). Paul also held Roman citizenship and knew how to assert its privileges to help protect himself and the community of believers. And he was educated in Greek literature and philosophy, so he was able to speak to the Athenians on their own terms, quoting Greek poets as he told them about Jesus.

   - What assets has God given you to help you advance his kingdom by fulfilling your own unique life purpose?
   - What authors, poets, songwriters, etc. from your own culture could you quote to help the people around you understand better what God has done for them through Jesus?
   - What are the centers of cultural and intellectual influence in your country? What channels does this influence flow through? What followers of Jesus do you know who are working in these centers and channels? Pray together as a group for their strategic work.

3. After spending about two years in Greece, Paul reports back to the leaders in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch, then sets off on a third journey. He goes directly to the city of Ephesus. When he was in Greece, Paul must have recognized the strategic situation of this city. It has commercial ties and good transportation and communication links with Greece to the west...
and the rest of Asia Minor to the east, so it sits astride the entire new territory
the community has been expanding into.

Paul prepares for his work in Ephesus by making a preliminary visit there
at the end of his second journey and leaving his coworkers Priscilla and Aquila
in the city until he can return. They help a man named Apollos understand
more accurately about Jesus and eventually send him over to Achaia, where
his learning and eloquence are a “great help” to the new believers in Greece.
Meanwhile Paul himself arrives back in Ephesus. There he holds daily public
discussions, God does “extraordinary miracles” through him, and the new
believers demonstrate their repentance publicly and dramatically. This phase
of Acts ends with the influence of the good news radiating outward from
that city.

Put yourself in the place of one of the following characters from
this phase of Acts, and tell your story in your own words. Say what
your life was like before you met Paul, and explain how things
changed when he came to your city and told about Jesus. If you
wish, you can present this as a dramatic monologue to your small
group or in a worship gathering.

- Lydia or the fortune-telling slave girl or the jailer from
  Philippi
- Dionysius or Damaris (Athenians who hear Paul speak in the
  Areopagus)
- Priscilla, who works with Paul in Corinth and agrees to move
to Ephesus
- A new believer in Ephesus who burns a valuable collection
  of magic books

Luke says that in Ephesus, Paul was “arguing persuasively
about the kingdom of God.” He summarizes Paul’s message in
Thessalonica and Corinth by saying that he proclaimed Jesus as
the Messiah. And he records how Paul told the Athenians that
God now “commands all people everywhere to repent.” Explain
how these three summaries of Paul’s message (which are actually
different ways that Luke describes the “good news” throughout
Luke–Acts) all relate to one another.
INTRODUCTION

In this sixth phase of Acts, Luke describes how Paul brought the good news about Jesus to the capital city of Rome. This account completes Luke's portrayal of how the community of Jesus' followers expanded throughout the Roman Empire.

Luke isn’t claiming that Paul was the first one to go there with the good news. As we’ll see, he tells how believers from Rome came out to greet Paul as he approached that city. And Luke isn’t saying that the believers within the empire are the only ones who matter. He’s aware that the community is already spreading beyond its borders (into Ethiopia, for example). Rather, he’s using the empire as a figure for the whole world, to show how Jesus’ promise was fulfilled that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in [the Messiah’s] name to all nations.” (The inhabitants of the Roman Empire sometimes referred to it as the *oikoumene*, “the whole world.” For example, in Thessalonica, the mob complains to the city officials that “these men who have caused trouble all over the world,” that is, everyone in the empire, “have now come here.” Luke is drawing on this notion for his portrayal.)

In this phase of the book the community breaks through a final barrier, one of class and status, as its witness to Jesus reaches into the highest levels of society. But this happens not through the elevation of its messengers into...
lofty positions, but rather, paradoxically, when Paul is arrested, detained, and ultimately brought to Rome as a prisoner—in one of the lowest positions in society. By embracing this fate (“I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die . . . for the name of the Lord Jesus,” he says), Paul models Jesus’ teaching that “it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.” The good news comes to the empire’s rulers embodied in Paul’s own person as a call to humility and servanthood.

Because of its length, we’ll look at this final phase of Acts over the next four sessions. In this session, we’ll see how Paul traveled from Ephesus back to Jerusalem.

READING

Have someone read about the riot that takes place in Ephesus, beginning where you left off last time and ending where the city clerk dismisses the assembly. Then have people take turns reading these parts of Paul’s journey to Jerusalem:

- From Ephesus through Macedonia and Greece (Achaia) to Troas
- In Troas (where Paul speaks all night with a group of believers)
- From Troas to Miletus (including the conversation with the elders from Ephesus)
- From Miletus to Tyre, Caesarea, and the home of Mnason
- In Jerusalem. End where Paul makes a vow with four other men and goes to the temple to “give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.”

You can find the places mentioned in this reading on the map on page 112. Note that Paul picks Luke up in Philippi, where he left him in last session’s reading, and brings him with him to Jerusalem. (Luke once again writes “we” and “us.”)

DISCUSSION

1 Paul has been in Ephesus for over two years and is beginning to feel it’s time to move on. “All the Jews and Greeks” in the surrounding province of Asia have now “heard the word of the Lord,” and Paul wants to help establish the community of Jesus’ followers in further parts of the empire. He decides to return to Jerusalem, traveling first through Macedonia and Achaia, and then he says, “I must see Rome.” Paul doesn’t realize at this point exactly how he will “see” (NIV “visit”) Rome, but this is the desire that’s stirring in his heart. Even so, he stays in the province of Asia “a little longer,” until a city-wide riot breaks out in Ephesus and proves so dangerous that Paul can’t address the crowd. He realizes it’s definitely time to leave.

- Have you ever had an experience where God first gave you a desire to do something, and then, over time, worked out the circumstances for this to happen, perhaps in a way you wouldn’t have expected? If so, tell the group about it. Why do you think God sometimes gives people a desire before it’s time for it to be realized?

- So many people were becoming followers of Jesus in Ephesus that the lucrative trade in making shrines of Artemis was drying up, and the skilled workers rioted. What businesses might close in your community if great numbers of people chose to follow Jesus? Have you heard of this kind of thing happening anywhere today?

2 Paul tells the Ephesian elders on his way to Jerusalem that “in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.” At Tyre, the disciples urge Paul “through the Spirit” not to go to Jerusalem. In Caesarea, when Agabus prophesies that Paul will be bound and handed over to the Gentiles, his companions and the local believers all plead with him not to go. They only give up and say “the Lord’s will be done” when they see Paul won’t be dissuaded.
Paul follows the advice of the disciples and provincial officials in Ephesus who tell him not to go into the theater to try to address the rioting crowd. But he doesn’t follow the advice of the many people who tell him “through the Spirit” not to go to Jerusalem. Why the difference?

By giving these many warnings, do you think the Spirit is trying to keep Paul from going to Jerusalem? Or is the Spirit preparing him for what lies ahead? How would it help Paul to know in advance what was coming?

As Luke describes his journey with Paul to Jerusalem, he gives us a glimpse of what life is like in the early communities of Jesus’ followers that they visit along the way. For example, they stay seven days in Troas so they can “break bread” with the disciples there “on the first day of the week.” We learn from this episode that the Troas community met on Sunday evenings in an upper room for a meal and a discussion, in this case led by a visiting teacher. (Luke says literally that Paul “dialogued” with them.)

Look again at what happens at the various stops along this journey (Troas, Miletus, Tyre, Ptolemais, Philip’s house in Caesarea, Mnason’s house) and identify as many more practices of these early communities as you can. Which of these practices would you like to see your own community adopt or try out from time to time?

INTRODUCTION

Just as the Holy Spirit warned Paul, “prison and hardships” are indeed waiting for him in Jerusalem. Before he’s even been there a week, his presence provokes a riot. He’s nearly killed by a mob before the Roman commander can rescue him. Because of the controversy that surrounds him, he’s kept in custody in Jerusalem and then sent to Caesarea as a prisoner. But God promises him that all of these trials have a deeper purpose: “As you have testified about me in Jerusalem,” he says, “so you must also testify in Rome.” Through these experiences Paul’s desire to “see” Rome (that is, to help proclaim the good news there) is beginning to be fulfilled.

READING

Read the story of how Paul was seized by a mob in Jerusalem, rescued by the Roman commander, and sent to Caesarea. Begin where you left off last time, and end where Governor Felix orders Paul to be kept under guard in Herod’s palace. Have people take these parts:
As we saw last time, the elders devise a plan for Paul to demonstrate that he doesn’t really encourage his fellow Jews to abandon the law. This plan nearly works. But just before Paul is due to pay his vow in the temple, some Jews from the province of Asia recognize him. They’ve probably come to Jerusalem for Pentecost, as Paul has, and they’re probably from Ephesus, since they also recognize his companion Trophimus. Convinced that Paul tells “everyone everywhere” that Jews should abandon their religious identity, stop keeping the law, and no longer worship in the temple, these Jews whip up the whole city into a frenzy. None of these charges against Paul are true. But when spread as rumors, they’re a deadly weapon that nearly gets him killed.

What false beliefs do people have about the community of Jesus’ followers where you live? What kinds of rumors are circulating? What effect have these had? What has been done, and what else could be done, to try to correct them?

Paul and the elders agree that Jews can still keep the law as a way of following Jesus. This means, among other things, that they will eat only kosher food, do no work on the Sabbath, give a tithe (10 percent) of their income to God, travel to Jerusalem for the annual festivals, and circumcise their baby boys.

How do you think these practices were transformed when they became ways for Jews to follow Jesus? If you’re a follower of Jesus, describe how one of your devotional practices, perhaps one that reflects your own cultural background, provides a means for you to live out your faith.

Paul is in constant danger of violence throughout these episodes, but he escapes repeatedly because of specific personal characteristics that he has. He speaks Greek, so he’s able to talk with the commander, but he also speaks Aramaic, so he’s able to address the crowd. He’s a Roman citizen, so he can’t be tortured for information, and he’s a native of a Roman province, so his case can be transferred to the governor in Caesarea. His identity as a Pharisee divides the Sanhedrin and prevents it from uniting against him. Beyond all this, God also intervenes providentially to help him. News of the riot reaches the commander in time for him to rescue Paul from the mob, and Paul’s nephew somehow hears of the plot against him and is able to report it to the commander so he can send Paul to safety protected by a huge armed guard.

Have you seen God use your own personal characteristics in particular ways or intervene providentially to enable you to advance his kingdom, either by protecting you from harm, opening up opportunities, making strategic connections with people, or accomplishing something similar? Think about this and share with the group anything that you now recognize.

On their earlier journeys, Paul and his companions are chased out of several cities by riots or violent conspiracies, including Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. Paul leaves Ephesus because of a city-wide riot, and when he arrives in Jerusalem, another one breaks out there. Mob violence continually threatens Jesus’ messengers as they bring the good news to cities in the Roman Empire.
PAUL IS RESCUED FROM A RIOT IN JERUSALEM BUT HELD AS A PRISONER

Have you ever experienced rioting where you live? (If not, what has been the closest and most recent riot you’re aware of?) What was the riot about, and how did it begin? What were its effects? Have you ever seen or heard about people rioting against the community of Jesus’ followers? If so, tell the group about it. Pray together that Jesus’ messengers and followers today would be protected from this deadly danger.

SESSION 25
PAUL DEFENDS HIMSELF BEFORE FELIX, FESTUS, AND AGRIPPA

INTRODUCTION
Paul is held in prison for two years without the charges against him being resolved. Nevertheless, over the course of many interrogations and hearings, he gets the opportunity to “testify to small and great alike” about Jesus the Messiah. The good news is now reaching “high-ranking military officers,” “the prominent men” of Caesarea, and governors and kings. The community is breaking through a class and status barrier, even while Paul remains a lowly prisoner.

READING
Read the story of how Paul is put on trial by Felix and has the chance to defend himself before Festus and Agrippa. Begin where you left off last time and end where Agrippa admits, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.” Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Tertullus
- Paul
- Felix
- Festus
- Agrippa
Paul has a particularly long part; if you'd like, different actors can take this role in the two different trials.

DISCUSSION

1 Earlier in Acts God does “extraordinary miracles” through Paul. He also delivers people miraculously from prison on three different occasions (the apostles, when they’re arrested in Jerusalem; Peter, when Herod wants to kill him; Paul and Silas, in Philippi). But now there’s no miraculous release and no report of God doing anything extraordinary.

Why do you think Felix spoke with Paul so often if he wasn’t prepared to make a commitment right away?

What are some of the most strategic opportunities you’ve had to help advance God’s kingdom? What helped prepare you to make the best possible use of those opportunities? If you feel you could have been better prepared, explain how.

Fill in the blank: “For the glory of God and the advancement of his kingdom, I want to see ________, and I’ll work to bring this about, whether it takes a short time or a long time.”

2 Felix keeps Paul in prison for two years, talking with him frequently but not responding to the good news and not resolving his case, just hoping for a bribe. Up to this point, Paul has been traveling around the empire, bringing the good news about Jesus to entire cities and provinces. Now, for two years, his witness is essentially to one person, Governor Felix, who has mixed motives for listening to him and who backs away from commitment when the realities of “righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come” strike too close to home.

But during these two years, through his frequent conversations with Felix, Paul comes to understand how Roman officials think and what their concerns are. At the end of this time, he providentially gets the chance to address two rulers before a room full of military commanders and prominent citizens, and he knows how to engage all of them. He tells Agrippa that his message is for “small and great alike,” and that he wants each person who hears him to become a Christian, whether this takes a “short time or long.”

Was it worth it for Paul to spend two years of his life this way?

3 Luke tells Theophilus in his first dedication that he wants to write “an orderly account” for him. He actually uses the same Greek expression when he describes how Peter recounted his experience with Cornelius to the apostles in Jerusalem: “Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story.” We see people tell the whole story, starting from the beginning, in several other places in Acts, including three places in this sixth phase where Paul tells his own life story: to the crowd in Jerusalem, to Felix, and to Festus and Agrippa. Luke values, models, and illustrates step-by-step storytelling, both of the larger story of God and of the storyteller’s own personal experiences, as a powerful channel for communicating the good news about Jesus.

The Damascus Road experience is the key turning point in Paul’s life story every time he tells it. What more do we learn about it from Paul’s three accounts of it in this part of Acts, beyond what Luke tells us when he first describes it? (For example, Paul tells the crowd in Jerusalem that Ananias was “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews” in Damascus; he specifies to Festus and Agrippa that Jesus spoke to him “in Aramaic.”) Using Luke’s original description as a framework, fill in the details that Paul adds. With this fuller picture, can you explain even better why this experience became the turning point in Paul’s life?
How would you tell the “whole story” of your faith in Jesus “starting from the beginning,” using Paul’s speeches here as a model? How would you describe your personal background? What are the most important moments of spiritual discovery you would relate? How would you weave your experiences together into a continuous narrative? Take some time outside the group meeting to work on this, perhaps with one or two friends, and then tell your story to the group or in a worship gathering.
PAUL IS BROUGHT TO ROME

INTRODUCTION

As we saw last time, Festus, the new governor, is inclined to grant the Jewish leaders’ request to have Paul transferred back to Jerusalem. He doesn’t realize that they’re “preparing an ambush to kill him along the way.” But Paul knows how dangerous it would be for him to stand trial back in Jerusalem, so he invokes his right as a Roman citizen and “appeals to Caesar” (he asks to have his case heard by the emperor personally). To escape the plot against him, Paul effectively has to prolong his own imprisonment, but at the same time, this ensures that he will at last “see Rome”—that is, if he can get there alive. Travel across the Mediterranean in this period is perilous at the best of times, and now, with winter coming on, the ship carrying Paul to Rome will likely encounter unfavorable winds that will take it off course and fierce storms that could sink it.

READING

Take turns reading a paragraph at a time through the story of Paul’s journey to Rome, beginning where you left off last time and reading to the end of Acts. (Note that Luke accompanied Paul on this journey, as he says “we” and “us” again.) As you read, you can follow the course of this journey on the map on page 125.

DISCUSSION

1 As Paul makes his way across the Mediterranean to Rome, battling storms and shipwreck, God once again does miracles for him and through him. Luke hasn’t told us about any miracles during the first two years of Paul’s imprisonment, but now he relates how an angel appears to Paul on the ship and assures him everyone aboard will survive; how Paul is unharmed when a poisonous snake bites him; and how he does miracles of healing on Malta.

Comment on this statement: “God does miracles on an as-needed basis, and if we’re not seeing miracles, it’s because we’re not putting ourselves in situations where they’re needed.”

2 God has a specific purpose for Paul’s life. The angel tells him, “You must stand trial before Caesar.” But the angel adds, “God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.” As a messenger of the kingdom, Paul is spreading its mercies even as he’s on the way to Rome. All the sick on the island of Malta are further beneficiaries of the kingdom proclamation Paul is on his way to make.

Can you give present-day examples of the blessings of God’s kingdom spilling over from its messengers to those around them, even as they’re “on the way” to somewhere else?

3 Paul has many freedoms, even as a prisoner. He can bring friends along on this voyage for their company and assistance. (Besides Luke, Aristarchus of Thessalonica travels with him. Aristarchus originally came with Paul from Ephesus to deliver “gifts for the poor” to Jerusalem, and it appears he remained with Paul throughout his imprisonment as one of the “friends” who were permitted to “take care of his needs.”) En route to Rome, Paul is allowed to spend time with friends and fellow believers in Sidon and Puteoli. In Rome, he stays in “his own rented house.” At the same time, however, he

126
always has a guard with him, and as he says to the Jewish leaders in Rome, “I am bound with this chain.”

Aristarchus’s expenses and the rent for the house in Rome were probably paid for by the believers in Thessalonica and in other cities where Paul had established communities of Jesus’ followers. How do you think Paul felt about having to be dependent on these believers? How do you think they felt about supporting Paul’s “ministry” by providing for his needs as a prisoner?

Have you ever seen someone held in official custody with handcuffs, chains, etc.? (Have you ever been held this way yourself? Only share about this if you feel comfortable.) What do you think it feels like to be chained when those around you are free? What effect do you think the experience of being chained for years had on Paul? If you believe God allowed Paul to have this experience for some purpose, explain what you think it was.

Luke ends his history without telling us how Paul’s case was resolved. This may be because Luke used the time he spent in Rome, waiting for Paul’s hearing, to write this history for Theophilus, and the outcome of the case wasn’t known by the time he finished.

Nevertheless, as we’ve noted, Luke–Acts is still a complete story. It traces the growth of the kingdom of God from its origins in the life and ministry of Jesus through its expansion outward from Jerusalem to “the ends of the earth,” symbolized by the imperial capital of Rome. Luke–Acts ends with Paul “explaining about the kingdom of God” to the Jewish leaders in Rome, who seem to have been largely uninformed about “this sect” until his arrival. He proclaims “the kingdom of God” and teaches “about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance” to everyone who comes to see him. Since God was able to make this possible for Paul, even in his imprisonment, the book’s readers are left with the assurance that, however Paul’s case might turn out, the sphere of God’s uncontested authority will continue to expand, bringing healing, liberation, forgiveness, and reconciliation everywhere it goes.

Do you see the “kingdom of God” expanding this way around you? Where and how?

Give everyone in the group the chance to share one or two of the most important things they’ve learned or come to understand better by reading and discussing Luke–Acts together.

- chapter and verse numbers removed  
  (chapter and verse range given at bottom of page)
- natural literary breaks
- no additives: notes, cross-references, and section headings removed
- single-column setting
- book order provides greater help in understanding

There is no Bible more suited to reading—from the beginning of the book to the end—than *The Books of The Bible*. This “new” approach is actually the original approach, and I love it.

Scot McKnight
North Park University

For more information or to download the gospel of John, visit http://www.thebooksofthebible.info. Premium editions of this Bible are scheduled for future release from Zondervan at your favorite Christian retailer.

Bible reading is declining at such a rapid rate that within 30 years the Bible will be a “thing of the past” for most Christ-followers. One of the main reasons for this decline is the format of the Bible. The format we know today was created so that a “modern” world could divide and analyze and systematize the Scriptures. But this made the word of God practically unreadable. As we move into a postmodern world, we’ll need to recapture the stories, songs, poems, letters, and dreams that naturally fill the pages of Scripture. Only then will a new generation of readers return to the Bible.

Christopher Smith argues in this book that the “time for chapters and verses is over.” He explains how these divisions of the biblical text interfere with our reading and keep us from understanding the Scriptures. He describes how Biblica has created a new format for the Bible, without chapters and verses, with the biblical books presented in their natural forms. And he shares the exciting new approaches people are already taking to reading, studying, preaching, and teaching the Bible in this new presentation.

Paperback, 234 pages, 5.5 x 8.5
Retail: $15.99

Available for purchase online or through your local bookstore.
There is an increasing recognition that we need to engage the Bible as a collection of books. But we haven’t been taught to read or study the Bible on the book level. Almost all of our approaches to the Bible are based on chapters, verses, or sections, so how do we change this?

The units of meaning in the Bible are not chapters, or verses, or topical sections, but the literary compositions that God inspired to create the Scriptures. If we want to know the meaning of God’s Word, we need to engage these compositions on their own terms. This means understanding why they were written, what kind of writing they are, how they are put together, and what major themes and ideas they develop and pursue. This book answers these questions for each of the books in the Bible by presenting expanded versions of the book introductions included in *The Books of the Bible*, an edition of the Scriptures from Biblica that presents the biblical books in their natural literary form, without chapters and verses.

**Paperback, 176 pages, 5.5 x 8.5**  
**ISBN: 978-1-60657-045-6**  
**Retail: $15.99**

Available for purchase online or through your local bookstore.