



# Paul's First Missionary Journey

Six Bible studies on Acts 9-14  
Paul spreads the gospel message in Asia Minor

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## Bible Studies in this series

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<p><b>Daniel: Godly Living in a Pagan World</b> – 6 studies to encourage us as we live in a world that has become harsh to God. It will make all the difference to keep our faith in tough times.</p>	<p><b>Paul’s first missionary journey</b> – 6 studies on the conversion and first journey of Paul. See Paul as he grows and learn what the life of the Christian was meant to be.</p>
<p><b>Power of Prayer</b> – 6 studies on the power and help that we receive in prayer. Follow the saints in their prayers and learn from them how valuable prayer can be for you.</p>	

## **Introduction**

The story of Saul is the transition from religion to relationship. It is the story of a man set on fire by the message of the gospel. He begins as a man dedicated to the Jewish religion and ready to put any on trial who oppose his faith. He becomes a man who can't hold in the news about Jesus and begins to speak about Jesus once he is converted. After years of growing in faith, he and others in the church begin to pray about what is next. The Holy Spirit leads them to become missionaries across Asia Minor. As they travel from village to village, they are not afraid to speak in synagogues and street corners. They have success and face seeming defeat. They are in a battle with Satan for the souls of men and Satan does not give up easily. As we travel with Paul, we never know what to expect. One thing is certain, however, the word of God is spread throughout the region of Cyprus and central Asia Minor leaving behind small churches of believers in his wake.

As Christians, we often don't feel that we know how to spread the message of the gospel. The ministry of Paul gives us a pattern for witness. Like Paul, we need to see that Christianity is different than all the religions of the world. It is about a relationship with the Lord and not about rules and regulations. It is that relationship that we need to never stop talking about. We need to be on fire sharing what the Lord has done for us and what He is willing to do for those around us. People still need to hear the message that God cares and that God keeps His promises to them. As we look around in our world, we need to pray about how we can share that message effectively with others. Realize that you will have successes and that there will be times that Satan pushes back because you are taking souls away from him. Our witness is on a battlefield and while God is ultimately going to win, there will be times when we face pain or disappointment in the battle. Like Paul, we should never give up.

Paul's purpose in life, namely to bring people closer to Jesus Christ, needs to be our purpose as well. Often the church gets caught up in the operation of the organization or in caring for its people. Those are necessary tasks but should not keep us from sharing our faith. Like the early apostles, we need to take time to pray and ask the Lord how He is going to use the gifts that we have in sharing the message of salvation. God will train us and will guide us where and how we do His ministry. It is not as difficult as we often make it out. We don't have to be eloquent in our speech. We simply tell them what the Lord is doing in our life. We tell them the stories about Jesus in the bible and about God's care for His people. It will be easy to be quiet or give up when Satan pushes back on our message. We may even feel like God has failed us when things don't go easy. Just continue to speak as Paul did. Some will reject the message just as they did Paul. Others will be changed and will find new life in

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## **How to use this Bible study**

Each of the six chapters contains an introduction to help you get the big picture and is followed by thirteen questions to help you dig into the truth. The questions will help you understand what is going on and apply it to your own lives. The leader's guide provides answers for the questions that can be used in a Sunday Bible class or a small group. In a small group setting, you may find it helpful to copy the four-page leader's guide for each person. There are also student guides provided at the back of the book. In a large setting, it may be easier to copy those guides so that each of the members of the class has a student guide for personal use. Notice that there are also three questions at the end of each lesson that can either be discussed as you meet together or assigned for people to think about in the coming week.

My prayer is that you and the members of your group or class can grow through these studies. The answers in the leader's guide may challenge you to find deeper meaning and application for your lives. Often we try to overcome problems in life by ourselves. The goal of this study is to help you picture what the flood was like and decide what God is calling you to do in your own life. Noah doesn't say much in the Bible but his actions speak loudly about trusting God and obedience. Often we want to tell God how to help us. He often has a better way if we will just listen to Him. As you study, realize that many of the questions have no single answer but are meant to help people find God's help in your trials. If you need to take more than one week per lesson, do so and enjoy the discussion and the learning. The narrative of the flood is seldom studied but has so much to teach us.

### **Bibliography**

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## **1. Paul's Conversion** **Acts 9:1-19**

**Big idea: Aim for a relationship with God, not just being religious**

The story of Saul is the transition from religion to relationship. As we first see Saul in this chapter, we see an angry animal whose very breath is dangerous. Like other rabbis, he was jealous to protect the law and thought that Christ's followers should be put on trial and punished to keep the faith pure. Suddenly, Saul was on trial. The light shines from the heavens on his heart and reveals the blackness that was there. The judge of the Christians had become the accused of Christ. Blinded by the Shekinah light of God, Saul heard how the Lord wanted to have a relationship with him. After three days of fasting and pondering what had happened, God sent his servant Ananias to tell Saul that he was forgiven and chosen for the extraordinary task of bringing the gospel to the gentiles. He would open up the eyes of others as God opened Saul's eyes to see the truth.

Christianity is different than the religions of the world. Religion is built on rules and programs. Faith is built on a relationship with Jesus Christ. Many in the church think the church must be pure. The less than perfect should change, or the pious will discard them. They judge others for their weakness until crisis turns their worlds upside down, and they need a Savior who will help them in their weakness. The rules are swept away as we sit at the bedside of a loved one or try to pick up the pieces of a shattered life. We need a friend who will help us, and so God comes to us and gives us His healing and peace. With the rules set aside, God calls us to minister to the broken and hurting. He calls us to be His hands and feet, building relationships with others who need the grace of God in their misery.

If there is a difference between Saul the rabbi and Paul the great missionary, it is found in the contrast between religion and relationship. Saul, the Jew, felt the need to keep the Jewish doctrine pure and force people to keep the Old Testament rules. Paul had the purpose of bringing people to know Jesus Christ. The scales had fallen off his eyes, and he saw God in a new way. People didn't get to heaven by keeping the law but by the mercy of God. The church today is not about rules and holy living so that we can approach God. It is about building a relationship with God so that He might redeem us and rebuild us with His love. God takes us as we are and transforms us through a personal relationship called faith. God uses our faith relationship with God to build relationships between others and Him as we share the love of Christ with them. Salvation is all about the relationship between God and us.

### **1. Who was the most intimidating person that you knew growing up?**

I remember a choir director who I had at college in an upper-level choir. He was always pushing the chorus to be their best and, at times, seemed harsh. He demanded a lot and had a look that made you want to crawl under your chair if you got a note wrong. He was not cruel, but he was not your friend. He also had one of the best choirs on campus, and it was a privilege to be part of that choir. I learned a lot about music at his feet. What experiences have you had in your life, and how have they affected you? Was the person mean, or were they just someone you knew you had to obey?

### **Read Acts 9:1-19**

### **2. Verse 1. What was Saul like before his conversion? What was the consuming purpose of his life?**

Saul seems cocky and dangerous, like an angry animal whose very breath was deadly. Here was a man who felt that everyone should obey the law and that these new Christians were perverting the law so God could not work on earth. Saul thought that he was doing God a service by persecuting the church. Jesus was dead, yet the early Christians believed that He was alive and the Messiah promised in the Old

Testament. It seemed a dangerous sect, and Saul was determined to wipe this sect out before it destroyed the Jewish faith. Saul even had the backing of the Jewish church. The letters that he got from the high priest would give him the authorization to seize the Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. Saul was determined to accomplish his task for the Lord.

**3. Verse 1. Who are the rule keepers in your church? What are they looking for in the church?**

It is easy to get caught up in the church's rules today and miss the relationships we should form. Most of us know people who are more concerned that everything is done "right" in the church. Often, they make the church rigid and stuffy. They struggle when people are less than perfect because the church is to be pure and made up of mature people. Like Saul, they are often looking for a church that will be pleasing to God and that they can be proud of before God. They see themselves as the keepers of the church and not as servants of God. Like Saul, they may have holy motives, but they need to see people from God's direction.

**4. Verse 4. How did the Lord break into Saul's life? What new insight did Saul gain?**

The man who was going to put Christians on trial for going against God's will suddenly found himself on trial. The trip to purge the church ground to a halt when the light of God shone on Paul's heart and revealed the blackness that was there. He met the Lord in the Shekinah light of God on the Damascus Road. Jesus was alive, just as the Christians had said. Saul thought he was serving God when he was persecuting the Messiah. He was reeling on the ground and came to understand that he didn't know God or have a relationship with Him. His self-righteous rule-following meant nothing. Suddenly, God turned his life upside down.

**5. Verse 4. How does God use a crisis to teach us and prepare us for more incredible ministry?**

It is often a crisis that turns our world upside down and shatters all those pet beliefs that we cling so hard to. We thought God would protect us and that Christians never should suffer. We find ourselves on the wrong end of a disagreement at our church or find that a plan we have for the future doesn't work. We begin to wonder where God is in this problem or wonder why this is all happening to us. At those times, the Lord breaks us to be open to new ideas and directions in ministry. It is a time when He causes us to stop what we are doing and start asking Him for guidance. We have put our faith in the things that we thought were right instead of taking the time to learn from the Lord what He wants with our lives.

**6. Verse 8. What was Saul like after his encounter with Jesus? What thoughts might have come to him in the three days of fasting and praying?**

Paul was a man who was broken as God turned his world upside down. The leader had to be led by the hand into the city that he thought he would take by storm. One pictures him sitting for three days trying to figure out what had happened. He had seen Jesus in the light of God and heard the voice of one who he thought was dead. The religious Saul fasted and prayed as he searched all that he knew from the Old Testament about the Messiah. He may have even wondered why God had not destroyed him for opposing the Lord and His Messiah. There in his darkness, the blind man began to see. God had made a covenant with His people based on love and not on the law. God had called them to be His people and loved them even when they were imperfect. He was a God of relationships and mercy to Saul and the world.

**7. Verse 8. What can we do after we are broken that we find impossible to do before God's intervention?**

Sometimes, we have to be broken to become useful to the Lord. With its self-confidence, our world is shattered, and we are forced to look up to heaven for answers. God's love is at our side by the bed of a loved one or in the shattered fragments of a life gone wrong and broken. Our best choice is to throw ourselves on God's mercy, knowing that we have nothing with which to bargain. In our prayers in the



study of His word, God reaches out, and possibly for the first time, we feel like He has touched our hearts. Life is not bound up in the rules but in the cross. We understand the love of a God who gave up His Son so that we might know and love Him. God is real to us in a way that we could never have imagined before.

**8. Verse 13. How did Ananias feel about being asked to deliver the message? What would Christianity look like if Ananias had never approached Saul?**

Ananias was present in Damascus, but he was certainly not anxious to obey God's call to confront Saul. It must have been comforting to find Paul praying instead of still making threats against the people of God. I don't know that that made it a comfortable visit, but Ananias, who we don't know anything about other than this text and a mention Paul has of him as he tells this story later in life, obeys the Lord and trusts the Lord when God commands him to go. The ultimate measure of faith is to follow the Lord when God's call seems illogical or dangerous. The message he gave that day changed the world. Imagine how the world would look today without Paul's missionary journeys or all the Bible books he authored? Ananias was crucial to take Saul from persecutor to missionary of the gospel.

**9. How open are you to welcoming new people into your church? What about them makes you afraid?**

New Christians are often messy. They come with bad habits and lives scarred by sin. They often scare us as much as Saul scared Ananias. It might be that they don't dress well, swear, or have a bad reputation. We wish that all the new members of our church had their lives together when they joined. The problem is that many of them are a work in progress. The Paul that we remember was not the Saul that Ananias met that day. Saul would spend fourteen years learning and growing before making missionary trips and writing the New Testament books that we know and love. As you look at each new convert to the faith, look at them with the Lord's eyes and ask yourself how the Lord could use them to touch the lives of others that you are unable to reach. Give yourself to the Lord, and He will work miracles with the raw material we see before us.

**10. Verse 15. What is God's assignment for Saul? How would this require a relationship with God and not just rules?**

This Hebrew of the Hebrews was God's chosen instrument to be an apostle of the Gentiles. Ironically God sent Saul to many who were often not thought of as being good enough for the church. By the time we see him in Acts 15, he is their champion and is willing to defend the Gentile converts against people who were loyal Jews like he once was. God could have punished Saul for the many Christians he had brought to death, but the Lord chose to let Saul personally know and see Him in a way that few others in scripture ever had. God would transform Saul. Saul realized the great gift that the Lord had given him in calling him and was eager to build the relationship that he had with the Lord in the lives of others. God would work a change in many lives during his life and in the years to come.

**11. What do you think God is calling you to do with your life? Why must ministry be based on a relationship with the Lord and not on the rules?**

Paul would write about the spiritual gifts three times in the Bible (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12, and Eph. 4), sharing that we are not all meant for the same ministries. Each of us has been given a specific ministry and a unique path of service by our Lord. Just as no two snowflakes are alike, no two Christians have the same gifts or course of service for the Lord. There is tremendous joy in discovering what God's call is for you. Ask your group members to mention the ministry areas that they believe each other would do well. Often that becomes an eye-opener and a great affirmation for us in the work that we do. Realize that there are no rules for what you must do. It is a process of drawing close to the Lord in word and prayer so that

you know what He is calling you to be. Your closeness to the Lord and your willingness to obey will determine how well you can do the service God has called you to.

**12. Verse 18. What change happened for Saul after he heard God's message?**

Scales fell off Paul's eyes, and Ananias baptized Saul. A conversion had taken place in Saul. The man who thought he served God had come to understand that he must follow Jesus as well. In the days after this encounter, Saul would meet with the Damascus disciples and preach in the synagogues, baffling the Jews as he spoke about how Jesus was the Christ. His witness was so powerful that it angered many Jews, and they set out to kill him. What a change had occurred to the man who was going to clean up the city of the Christians. He had a relationship with the Lord, and he desperately wanted others to see what he had learned. He was willing to live for this Jesus, who had become his friend, leader, and God.

**13. What does Paul's experience teach you about the heart of ministry and the value of having a deeper relationship with Christ?**

What sets Christianity apart from other world faiths is that it is about a relationship and not about a set of rules. Many of the world's religions have rules and doctrines to keep before you are worthy of that God and can enter heaven. Christianity is different. It is based on a relationship with a loving God who sent His son to die for us. He loved us and made us His children, and encourages us to build relationships with our brothers and sisters in the faith. Programs and doctrines will not bring people to faith, only connections with God and other Christians. If there is a difference between Saul the persecutor and Paul the great missionary, it is the contrast between rules and relationships. Saul kept the Jewish traditions and defended God from those who sought to live outside the law. Paul was always about a bond with the risen Christ who came and took a wretched man like Saul and made him the vessel of His grace. The relationship with Christ changed Saul into one of the most celebrated Christians who ever lived. It will change all of us as well.

**For now or later - taking the next step.**

Deep 1 In what ways have you held back from doing what God wants you to do? Why do you sometimes resist what God asks you to do?

Deep 2 If you had ever had a time (illness, job loss, etc.) when you had lots of extra time on your hands, what did you think about during that period? How could God have used that time to benefit your spiritual life and future?

Deep 3 What do you have to offer others who have not been Christians as long as you have? How could you be their guide when, like Saul, they are figuring out their way with Christ?



## **2. Saul: Excited for Christ**

**Acts 9:19-31**

**Big idea: The gospel is to be a fire that has to be shared!**

Saul just couldn't hold in the news about Jesus. Verse 20 says, "at once, he began to preach" In less than a week, Saul had gone from being one ready to destroy followers of Jesus to a man preaching on fire for Jesus among the Jews. He now knows Jesus is the Son of God. The Shekinah light on the Damascus Road lit up Saul's heart and put a fire in his soul. The change was so dramatic that it struck fear in the hearts of the Jewish community. The man who had come with letters from the High Priest in Jerusalem had turned against them. He never stopped talking about Jesus. Saul is the perfect example of what happens when God transforms a life. He converted many to faith because his life witnessed the gospel message of Jesus. Jesus had redeemed him, and Saul could not keep silent about the unexpected mercy of the Savior.

Saul is in stark contrast to most church members. We barely talk about our faith with others. We feel awkward about telling others about Jesus and may even think that people have a right to their opinion. The few that I have seen on fire for their faith are usually converts. One minute they are calm, and the next minute they are animated and talking about the change that Jesus has brought to their lives. They know what it is like to be without God's love and salvation. They have felt the pain of living in fear and shame and have experienced the rush of mercy and grace flood their darkness and hopeless lives. God has transformed them, and they have to tell people their story because they understand what it is to live without Jesus. It may be tough to go back and talk to their old friends, but they ache to help friends as God has helped them. The world has to know about God's love.

I feel a little guilty as I read this text. I ask myself when was the last time I was as excited about Jesus as Saul is here. Having been a Christian all my life, I have never known the darkness that Saul or the new Christian has known. You and I need to talk about Jesus with those who live in darkness or shame. Saul was excited because God had given him life instead of destroying him for persecuting Christians. We need to think about what life would be without Jesus' salvation or the daily chance to bring our cares to Him in prayer. Such meditation might help us see the need of others who don't have Jesus. Our witness could give people the benefits that we have had for a lifetime and bring a kinder and gentler world as well. Maybe it is time we became as excited as Saul so that others can have the mercy of the cross and love of God.

### **1. What is something so near and dear to your heart that you would make a great sacrifice?**

For many, their children are near and dear to them. They also become attached to the activities that their children engage in, like scouts or sports. Others have hobbies like camping or woodworking that require tremendous sacrifices of money to buy the RV or woodworking tools and the time to use them. Others feel that causes like feeding the poor or supporting the local schools are essential and so they become captivated with the ministry and the good that it does in the community. Let the group discuss what they find important. How have they made sacrifices of time and money to support something dear to their heart?

### **Read Acts 9:19-31**

### **2. Verse 20. What change do we see in Saul after his conversion? What had Saul experienced that created this change?**

Saul immediately began to share what he had learned about Jesus. In a moment, Paul had gone from being the persecutor of the church to one of its greatest champions. The persecutor became the convert. It was a change that amazed everyone who saw it. Here is the pattern that he would keep throughout his ministry. He went to the local synagogue to preach the truth about Jesus to His fellow Jews. We can only imagine

what it was like for Saul to be confronted with the Shekinah light on the road to Damascus. In that light, he saw that Jesus was the Son of God and the long-awaited Messiah. In persecuting Jesus, Paul was persecuting God. He was persecuting God's answer to humanity's sin promised from the beginning of time. He would devote the rest of his life to letting others see how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament promises and the Savior of the world.

**3. Verse 20. Who do you know who has the excitement that Saul shows in this text?**

Often the people on fire for Jesus are the people who are new converts to the faith. They know what it is like to live without God's love and salvation. They felt the rush of mercy and grace that came to them when they were in a low part of their lives. The hope that they have found in Jesus has changed their future and their ideas about themselves. The story is one that they have to tell. Their conversion experience helps them to share what the cross has come to mean for them. Those who have been Christians from birth have often never experienced the darkness that a new convert has felt. Sadly, new converts are not like Saul, who knows the Old Testament well. They tend to speak from emotion instead of understanding the full truth of the gospel. This problem is a delicate tension. We want the new convert to be well-grounded in the faith, but they often lose the excitement that they had when they found Jesus over time. Although they shouldn't rush into a ministry unprepared, we need to encourage them to not wait before telling people about their stories. People need to see how God changes lives.

**4. Verse 21. What do you think that the Jews expected Saul to say when he spoke at the synagogue? How do they react to his words?**

I am sure that the Jews of Damascus expected Saul to preach against Jesus and encourage others to persecute the Christians as the High Priest had authorized him to do. The change in Paul was astonishing. Here was the enemy of Christianity proclaiming that Jesus was both God and Savior. This new Saul struck fear into the hearts of the Jewish community. He had turned against them and proclaimed Jesus with the power of one who knew his Old Testament well. What was probably even more dangerous was his transformed life. He showed the power of Jesus and the truth of what he was saying by his actions and enthusiasm. The Jews knew that they had to get rid of him before he could convert the whole community to believe in Jesus. They decided to kill him to silence his witness. The man who had come to cleanse the city of Christians was now taking the community for Christ.

**5. Verse 21. What was powerful about Saul's testimony? What might impress you if you were to hear him today?**

Many are hesitant to speak when they first come to know Christ. Saul was bold and not afraid to stir up controversy. He knew the Old Testament and could "prove" how the life of Jesus fulfilled much of what he had learned in God's word. Even more remarkable was the witness of his life. Something had happened to transform this enemy of Jesus into a man who could not stop singing Jesus' praises. He was willing to suffer rejection and abuse because of the grace that he had received from Jesus. He persevered because he believed that the message just had to be told. Jesus had saved him instead of putting him to death for his actions against the church. He was confident that if the Lord could save him, God would save anyone who accepted the message Saul shared. Discuss what you might have been impressed with about Saul. Would it have been his confidence, his humility about himself, or something else?

**6. Verse 23. How has the Lord turned Saul's life upside down by his conversion? Who must Saul rely on to spare his life?**

The hunter has become the hunted. He came to town to pursue Christians yet was smuggled out of town lowered in a basket, like a common criminal. Both Jews and Gentiles would hate him throughout his life, ending in an arrest and trial in Rome at the end of the book of Acts. He never complained but counted it a privilege to suffer for the sake of Jesus (2 Tim 1:12). Most people believe that Saul spent three years after

this escape in Arabia, the desert region just southeast of Damascus (Gal. 1:17-18). Saul seems to have used these years to spend time with the Lord pondering what he had learned and, perhaps, staying clear of the Pharisees who may have been upset over his transformation and betrayal of their cause. Ironically, the very people he came to persecute are the ones who will help Paul escape. God was not finished yet with Paul but had plans for Paul to carry God's name to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).

**7. Verse 23. What are the dangers to a new convert who wants to share what the Lord has done for him? How can we help them through these trials?**

Friends and relatives usually surround those who have grown up in the church. Friends believe as we do, so they insulate us from some of Paul's troubles. New converts often face the hatred or persecution of their families, who see their actions as a betrayal of their values or a threat when the new Christian talks about their faith. The new Christians may also find a level of distrust from long-time believers who disapprove of habits and life choices that the new Christians carry on from their former life. Long-time believers don't understand that it takes time to rid themselves of the urge to curse or swear and that your clothing may at times be less than modest. New Christians are learning the faith and what God wants and expects of them. It is a process that takes time. Please realize that the new Christians will also be wrestling with themselves and the old life's temptations. Like Saul, life has been turned upside down, and they need time to change their thoughts and habits. As mature Christians, we need to come alongside them and encourage them in their faith. We need to be patient as they struggle to change their lives and be willing to teach them God's ways.

**8. Verse 26. What reception does Saul get in Jerusalem from the leaders of the church? What reasons do you think that they had for being cautious with Saul?**

After three years in the desert, Saul comes to Jerusalem to meet Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. The text says that Paul "kept trying" to get into their fellowship, but they would not accept him. Perhaps, they were still not sure about this former persecutor of the church. They may have even wondered if Saul's change of heart was a trick to gain their confidence and use the knowledge to arrest the Christians. His absence for three years was probably another consideration. They wondered where he had been and why he had waited so long to appear before the other Christians. One understands their reservations for the new church were fragile. There were so many unanswered questions about Saul that it created an atmosphere of suspicion and doubt.

**9. What concerns does the church have with new members who are excited about Jesus? In what ways can we help new converts mature so that they can serve better?**

New Christians are often messy. They come with bad habits like swearing and poor values. They don't understand the church's culture and faith and often do things that offend a long-time Christian. Long-time Christians wonder if the new person will stay around or be here for a look one Sunday and gone the next. They need someone who will accept that they are less than perfect and help them grow. Someone needs to shepherd them by encouraging and teaching them. We need to understand that God wants each person to be part of His church and that it is our job to help them grow into the saint that God wants them to be. Know that new converts who get such practical help may mature into people who can become leaders and servants in the church. They just need a little help through those first troublesome days when they and others are scared and uncomfortable.

**10. Verse 27. Who intervenes on Saul's behalf, and what is his message about this new convert?**

Fortunately, Barnabas intervenes and tells Saul's story to the church. He relates Saul's conversion and Saul's willingness to stand up before the Jews and proclaim the resurrection of Christ. Barnabas convinces the leaders that Saul is a believer and that the Lord has a particular task for Saul in His church. It is Barnabas again who will bring Saul seven years later into ministry. In Acts 11:25, Barnabas looks for

Saul and brings him to Antioch to serve in the church. From there, Saul and Barnabas will set off on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:4) to Asia Minor. Barnabas becomes the bridge for Saul to be accepted and to do the ministry that we know so well. Without Barnabas, one wonders if Saul would have ever had the ministry that we see in scripture.

**11. Verse 29. What is the reaction of Saul's Jerusalem colleagues when he begins to speak about Jesus? How do you think that they saw the new Saul?**

Saul's witness frightens his old friends. The fellowship of the Christians gave Saul confidence to talk to the Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem. Saul, having been born in Tarsus, was one of this group. He had even been with them when they had stoned Stephen to death for his witness (Acts 6:9-15, 8:1). It may have been a desire to witness to those who had been friends or a desire to take up the mantle of Stephen in Jerusalem. It did not go well, and this group wanted to kill Saul to silence his witness. Saul was a turncoat in their eyes and worthy of the same treatment that they gave to Stephen. Saul heard the Lord tell him to go away and speak to the gentiles (Acts 22:21), and so the brothers took him down to Caesarea and sent him home to Tarsus.

**12. What struggles do we often face when we speak to friends and family about Jesus? Conversely, what can convince them of the truth of your message?**

We often shy away from talking to friends and family about Jesus. If we are a new Christian, many of our old friends and family are still stuck in the sins that we left behind. They get angry when you won't get drunk with them or swear like a sailor. They feel uncomfortable with the new and more godly you. It makes them realize that their life is far from perfect. Long-time Christians feel the disdain of a culture that tells us we have no right "forcing our faith on others." We fear losing friendships if we talk about Jesus or our church. Like Saul, we have to recognize the consequences if we are silent. We doom those around us to be stuck outside the church and God's blessings. God can't use us to bring them salvation and the help we all need from God each day. While we don't want to lecture them about Jesus, we can share the joy we have in Christ. Our life with the blessings that come because of our values and our attitudes makes us look different. People will want the happiness that Jesus brings to our lives when their lives struggle with sinful actions and ideas.

**13. When have you been excited about Jesus like Saul is in the text? What steps could you take to reclaim your enthusiasm?**

Saul's actions challenge us. When was the last time that you were excited about Jesus? We are often excited about a hobby, our children, or even a recent vacation. We will speak to people unasked about the joys that those people and activities bring. Sadly, most Christians today have a close relative who is not a Christian. We hide our faith for fear of offending them. Saul was excited because God had chosen him for a unique ministry instead of destroying him for persecuting the church. What could we do if we were excited about our faith in Jesus? How would it impact our families and bring them closer to the Lord? We all think that it would be hard to have Saul's enthusiasm. That may be true, but we can always have more than we do now. It is just a matter of being in the word and prayer. How you live affects them and shows Jesus to them. Live out your faith and look for ways to share your faith and connect those you love with other Christians. Let others share in the joy that you have in Jesus.

**For now or later - taking the next step.**

**Deep 1** In what ways can new Christians have a profound witness to Christians and non-Christians?

**Deep 2** How would a Barnabas change the character of your church? In what ways would he be a blessing to newer members?

**Deep 3** Who is God calling you to share your faith with so that they can have the joy of Christ that you enjoy?

### **3. The strategy of the Spirit**

#### **Acts 13:1-12**

#### **Big idea: God opens our hearts and empowers His people for ministry**

What is next? The church centered in Jerusalem has fanned out to Syria and beyond due to persecution. They have begun to witness to Gentiles as well as Jews, and so we find these five men praying what is next. They are a diverse group from Cyprus, Africa, and modern Turkey. The leaders fast and pray because they want to know God's will for the future. Their hearts burn for the church and for those who don't know Jesus. They know that they should share the message of salvation, but they are not sure how. When God's call comes to them, they have been busy preaching and teaching. They have not sat idly but feel that the "What is next will be an extension of what they are already doing. They also know that they will not do it by themselves but that the whole church needs to get behind the ministry. They send Barnabas and Saul with the prayer and financial support that they need. God has a strategy, and they are ready to move forward.

It is a question that many churches struggle with, and some have given up finding the answer. What is next? Our world is changing just as it did in the time of the book of Acts. We see people struggling with busy lives and fractured families and values. Prayer has to bathe the question of what is next in the church. Our hearts must burn with a desire to bring the gospel to others so much that we regularly pray for the lost. Yet, you will not find God's direction if you sit in a cave and wait for it. It will grow out of the service that the Lord has called you to do. He will train you and connect you with others who will go on this journey with you. Oh, that the church would stop having meetings to discuss what they need to do and spend time in prayer together. God has the direction that we need to follow, and prayer and Bible study are how we will find God's path for the church and us. As God leads us into the future, we all need to support the shared ministry that the Lord has given. Encourage each other and work together. Use the gifts you have and the wisdom God has given you in your service to go into God's future boldly.

Now is the time to serve and to pray. God will call those who are already using their gifts in service to Him. He is training those people for even vaster opportunities in the future. He wants them to seek His will and not demand that God do our will or give us the possibilities we think we deserve. These are people who will pray and not plan. They will pray, asking what the Lord wants them to do in the future. They have a heart burning for ministry and trust the Lord to give them direction for their service. God is the only one who knows the strategy of how to reach a city, a county, or a nation. As each of us uses the gifts that we have, we need to open our hearts so that the Lord can bring us to even greater ministries. We will not discover them by ourselves but need to pray and search the scripture to know God's will and harness His power as we serve individually and as a church.

#### **1. How do you decide what you will do for vacation this coming year?**

Sometimes, we plan where we want to go based on what we haven't seen, and sometimes it is more of a spur of the moment decision based on how we feel. We have favorite places that we have seen a couple of times, like Rocky Mountain National Park or Mackinac Island in Michigan. Other times, we have gone to places once like Montreal or Arches National Park. We still need to do our research on what campgrounds we want to use and what sites we want to see, but the original choice depends on how we feel that year. Let the group consider where they would go if they had their choice this coming summer.

#### **Read Acts 13:1-12**

#### **2. Context: What is the context of the text? What has happened that led the five men to pray about the future of the church?**



Persecution scattered the church to Cyprus, Syria, and Phoenicia (Acts 11:19) so that the center of the church was drifting from Jerusalem to Antioch and later to Rome. The church had also begun preaching to Gentiles as well as Jews (Acts 11:20). The culture of the church was changing. Barnabas and Saul have been teaching for about a year in Antioch, resulting in the church's growth. God has set the hearts of His people on fire for the gospel, and so we imagine that the five assembled here are asking the Lord what is next. The men fast and pray because they have a heart for the message of salvation but are not sure what to do next. It was a time of change and uncertainty, and the men were seeking guidance from the Lord concerning the future of ministry.

**3. Verse 1. Who are the five men gathered together, and what have they been doing in Antioch?**

The diverse assembly of men is a mixture of people we have seen before and people new to the Bible story. Barnabas and Paul have been mentioned a couple of times before this. Simeon is thought by many to be the same Simon who carried Jesus' cross on Good Friday. Manaen is the adopted brother of King Herod. Lucius is from Cyrene and may have been part of the group that first witnessed to the Gentiles (Acts 11:20). It is a very diverse group from Cyprus, Turkey, and Africa who have been teaching and preaching in Antioch as they build up the church. They are serving and using the Lord's gifts and praying about what is next for them and the church. The men's diversity shows how the Lord has been expanding His church over a broad geographic area. God will soon enlarge the church into Asia Minor and Europe through two of these men.

**4. Verse 1: What should you be doing as you wait for God to guide you to what is next in ministry? Why is this essential for success?**

You will seldom find your call if you just sit in a cave and wait for it. God calls those who are busy serving the church and using their gifts already. He takes people who have shown that they are faithful in a simple task and calls them to great things as the master does in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14f). God uses the service that we do in His name as a time of training so that He can develop our skills and our faith. In the text, Barnabas and Saul have been teaching the church for over a year (Acts 11:26). God will call them for greater service. If we just sit and do little, we will not be ready for the Lord's tasks for us in the future. God calls the busy for further service. He prepares them for more extraordinary things by developing them in the service that they are doing now.

**5. Verse 2. How would you describe the heart of these men as they pray about the future?**

God calls them while they are fasting. These are not men on a diet but men whose hearts are burning for the church and living in expectation of God's leading. They have set aside food to focus on prayer and let the Lord lead them. It is their submission to the will of the Lord that will allow God to do miracles through them. They are not asking God to bless their plans but humbly seek His direction. Like Peter and Cornelius (chapter 10), who receive messages while praying, God speaks to them and answers their prayers. God knows where the church should go, and they want to follow His path. Throughout the book of Acts, we see how God directed His church and opened ministry opportunities. God's people did not initiate ministry but were led to the ministry that the Lord prepared for them.

**6. Verse 2: What is often missing as the church and its leaders think about the future of ministry together?**

All too often, it seems that we plan when we should pray. We meet together as pastors or leaders and survey the thoughts of those who are present. We ask the congregation for their ideas and their approval for grand plans for ministry. We may begin with a simple prayer or ask for God to bless our plans. What we need is to pray to the Lord with vigor to know God's will. We should not wring our hands when times are uncertain. We need to fold them in prayer, submitting ourselves to God's will and willing to make the sacrifices that it may take for His will to come. Notice that it often starts with just a few. The Bible



mentions only five people here, but the change that comes because of their prayer is monumental. Imagine what could happen today if five children of God gathered today with the same burning desire for the lost. God would move mountains to guide them and accomplish the plan that He had for them.

**7. Verse 3. God calls Barnabas and Saul for the first missionary journey. What do the others do, and why is this important for the success of the new ministry?**

Barnabas and Saul will not change the world by themselves. Here we see the whole church getting behind the ministry that God has for them. The laying on of hands was recognition of the calling and gifts of people who would represent the people in God's service. It was not a new custom but as practiced when Moses laid his hands on Joshua and commissioned him as God had instructed him (Numbers 27:23). It was accompanied by more prayer as they separated the two for the task that the Lord had called them to do in the name of the congregation. The ministry would never be theirs alone. It set a pattern that Paul would follow as churches in Antioch, Philippi, and Ephesus would support and pray for Him. Paul's letters include many examples of the partners that God would give to Paul.

**8. Verse 3: How can the church serve those who God chooses for a new ministry?**

No one should have to work in God's ministry by themselves. The congregation needs to get behind them and support them with resources and with prayer. Many a pastor feels all alone. From experience, I can tell you that ministry can make you lonelier than the Maytag repairman. You need to pray for and encourage your leaders. You need to make financial sacrifices so that they and the ministry can have the resources that they need.

Find ways to lift them with cards and phone calls spiritually. Satan will want to bring these people down to stop the ministry that they are doing. If you are prayer warriors for them, you can ask the Lord to build a safety net around them and open up doors for ministry here in your midst or foreign countries for the missionaries. Few will go far in ministry if they are alone.

**9. Verse 4. Where do the two missionaries go, and why did the Holy Spirit send them to those locations?**

With the entire world before them, Barnabas and Saul began their ministry near home. The first missionary journey began in Cyprus, the home of Barnabas. It would continue in Asia Minor, the area that Saul considered home. It would be natural to want to share the gospel message with people who were dear to them. They spoke the language and knew the customs and geography of those lands. They may have had friends who they could depend on in those regions as well. Some from Cyprus had come to Antioch to bring the message to the gentiles (Acts 11:20), and Saul had spent several years in Tarsus (Acts 9:30), where one could argue that he had shared the message of the gospel with those who would listen. The contacts that Barnabas and Saul had in these regions could help the ministry they were undertaking.

**10. How do experience and skills shape the ministry that God calls us to do?**

We often think of starting missions in new places like Africa and Asia or even across town with a group of people who are not like us. Yet, when our hearts are burning for the salvation of others, we might do well to think of those who are closer to home. These are friends and relatives whose salvation is close to our hearts. We have experience with their lives and their struggles and understand the community where they live. The common bonds you have will present opportunities that make it natural for you to share God's love with them. Your skills may be more in tune with the needs of those closest to you as well. As you look at the ministry of St. Paul, you will find that he often begins with the Jews who understood the message of the Old Testament so that Paul could speak to them about the Messiah who came. You will be a missionary no matter whether the Lord sends you far away or close to home. You go where the Lord feels you can be the most effective.

**11. Verse 11. How does Saul respond to the first barrier to their ministry? What do Saul's words tell you about who is at work with them?**

He looks him straight in the eye. Saul is not intimidated by this child of Satan trying to oppose the gospel's message. Saul calls upon the Lord to move the power of Satan out of their way. The Lord responds with such intensity that Cyprus's proconsul comes to faith. Having opened the door for more ministry onto Cyprus, the two missionaries move on and travel to Asia Minor. Barnabas and Saul did not know the details of what their ministry would be like when they left Antioch; they were following the call of the Lord. Every day was a new adventure. The one thing they did know was that the Holy Spirit would be with them. The Holy Spirit gave Saul the strength to stand up to Satan and the curse for the sorcerer who was Satan's tool. It must have been a decisive moment for Saul and Barnabas as they realized that this missionary journey belonged to the Lord and they were just His tools.

**12. Why is it so important that we lean on the Holy Spirit as we begin any ministry?**

The forces that we oppose in ministry are strong, and we don't know what the future will bring in ministry. We can't overcome Satan and his demons by our might. Only the Lord has the power and the wisdom to handle whatever may come. We need to trust the Lord and let him deal with the challenges that the ministry can bring. Prayer is essential to our witness, for it is a chance to be guided by the Lord and strengthened for the challenges that lie ahead. Prayer is also a time to lay our concerns and obstacles in ministry on the Lord and ask that He would overcome the demons and worldly powers that may be in our way. If we lean on the power of the Holy Spirit, nothing is impossible. The Lord will give us the path for ministry and the resources to accomplish His goals.

**13. How would you summarize God's strategy for ministry in these verses? Who does He call, and how will they know where God wants them to serve?**

God calls those who are using their gifts in service to Him and willing to seek His will and not demand that God does our ministry. We need to find our ministry where God can use you and prepare you for even more excellent service. Serving the Lord is the way that the Lord prepares people and makes them useful. If you desire to teach, then go and find a way to teach. If you want to serve in the community, find a place where you can serve there. Through it all, pray and don't plan. Pray to the Lord, asking His desire for you. Let the Lord burn into your heart a passion for the lost, a desire for serving children, or a desire for helping those who are hurting. Throughout your ministry, trust the Lord to give you the next step and overcome the obstacles you may face. As you move forward, bringing your daily needs to the Lord in prayer, you can count on the Lord giving you the wisdom and strength to do ministry in His name.

**For now or later - taking the next step.**

Deep 1 How often do the leaders of your church pray together? Why is this essential if the church wants to serve the Lord, its members, and the community well?

Deep 2 What burns in your heart when you think of serving the Lord? What skills has the Lord given you that you are not using and what part of ministry intrigues you the most?

Deep 3 What skills and experience are you developing in ministry that the Lord could use in the future?

**4. In Pisidian Antioch**  
**Acts 13:13-45**  
**Big idea: It is all about Jesus**

What do you say when someone asks you to speak about the Bible? Saul and Barnabas have such an opportunity. It was customary for visiting teachers to speak at the synagogue. Saul could have softened the gospel so that he didn't offend anyone. Instead, they spoke boldly about Jesus. They began with Old Testament History showing the promises God had given to his people over 2000 years. Saul continues by showing how poorly the Jewish leaders treated the Messiah who came. Yet, God was not deterred. He did the impossible and raised Jesus from the dead. The Messiah that these Jews have been waiting for has come during their lifetime. God kept his promises through the giving of Jesus Christ. Now they could have forgiveness of sins and a new life in Jesus. It is the most important message that they can have in their life.

It is the most important message that you can share with others. People still need to know that God keeps His promises. We live in communities where a large number of people are hurting and think that God either can't or won't help them when they are in pain. God is seen as not caring about them. We need to help them see that God is willing to help. The Lord who sent His own son to die on a cross is not going to ignore us when we come to Him for help. We can't force them to turn to Jesus in their pain for many want help from Jesus without letting Jesus in their lives. However, millions have had their lives changed by the cross of Jesus. They have seen God's gracious act of kindness and have thrown themselves on his mercy because they believe that God will care for them in their pain. Jesus is the key to new life and help. Those who are hurting desperately need us to share the message of God's love so that they are open to His help.

What will you say when someone asks you to speak? Will you tell them that you are too busy to help them right now and suggest that they talk to an elder or the pastor of your church? Truth is that you are on deck and the Lord has called you to speak and help this person who needs God's mercy dealing with illness or a problem in life. What do you say? You could start, like Saul did, with all the promises that God has kept in your life. Let people see how God has helped you with your struggles so that they know God can help them with their problems. Don't belittle them or lecture them about how they need God. Let them see that God will help them if they let Him. You know of His power in your life and what God could do for them. Help them to see Jesus as a great friend who has already made the sacrifice of his life and who will continue to help them in their needs. You can't force them to accept Jesus' help but you can offer it and let the Holy Spirit work on their hearts and help them in their pains.

**1. What is the best piece of advice that you have ever been given?**

I remember asking my parents what they thought about me asking my girlfriend to marry me. My father, without missing a beat, told me that I would be a fool to let that woman go. Marriage is always a big decision and you always second guess your emotions because marriage is a decision for life. My father's words encouraged me to propose to my wife and marriage to her has been the best thing that I have ever done. It was nice that my parents thought as highly about her as I did. Encourage the class to share the greatest piece of advice that they have ever received and why it was so important to your life.

**Read Acts 13:13-45**

**2. Verse 15. What opportunity was Saul given when he came to Antioch? What was the focus of his message?**

Visiting the city of Antioch in Asia Minor, Saul and Barnabas were asked to speak at the local synagogue. The synagogue rulers would decide on who was going to lead the service and give the message. Often a different person would be chosen to lead the worship. Throughout their ministry, Saul and Barnabas would take advantage of this Jewish custom. Usually, the door of opportunity would slam shut as soon as the two spoke about Jesus as Messiah and they would not be invited back to speak again as would happen here in Antioch (Acts 13:45f). They could have soft-pedaled the message because they knew that everyone in attendance would not value the message. Instead, they spoke about God's promises and about Jesus' coming as the fulfillment of God's greatest blessing.

**3. Verse 15. How do you respond when someone asks for your advice or encouragement at a time when they are hurting?**

What do you say when someone asks you to speak? Perhaps it is a friend who knows you go to church and has been struggling lately because his mother is in the hospital. Maybe someone asks you what you think about a controversial topic around the water cooler at work or the PTA at your kid's school. It would be easy to shrug it off and pretend to be busy. You might even wish your pastor or a more mature Christian was there to answer the question. The reality is that the Lord has allowed you to speak on His behalf. We need to have a word of encouragement for the friend in trouble or the courage to calmly say what God says about a topic that may not be what the group wants to hear. It may be tough but you need to speak love to the hurting and voice the truth so that others can learn what God has said. You can't push that responsibility off on others.

**4. Verse 17-19. How had God helped His people throughout history? What does that say about God's trustworthiness in difficult times?**

God had made promises to His people and kept every one of them. Saul knows that he can't begin the discussion with the story of Jesus. He has to help these Jews and Gentile converts see that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the promises that God has made. He begins with the story of God's love for his people in the days of Abraham and Moses and continues through the promises to Samuel and David. This is a lesson on the character of God. God was there for His people even when they were not godly people (verse 18). The stress is on God's mercy and faithfulness. The Lord keeps His promises to His people in all kinds of situations. The people of God knew this message but it leads them into something that will be hard for them. Saul will talk about the coming of Jesus as the fulfillment of the greatest promise of all.

**5. Verse 17-19. What are some items that could be on a list of times when God has helped you? How might sharing those blessings help someone who is struggling in life?**

We need to remember that God keeps His promises to us. We often wonder what to say to people when we have the chance to witness about God. I have found that it is helpful to make a list of the promises that God has kept to me. It gives me concrete examples that I can share with someone in the hospital or someone who has doubts about whether God can be trusted to help them or the nation in times of trouble. Many of the sermons in scripture look back at Israel's history to show that God can be trusted to take care of the future. As you share your history with the Lord people can see that God keeps His promises. You can also plant the hope that God will help this person if they will only ask for help from God and trust that He will be there for them. God is faithful and wants to help. Your witness of how God has helped you will be a powerful way of bringing people out of the darkness and into the light of faith.

**6. Verse 23. What is the greatest promise that God kept for the people of Israel?**

Everything in Saul's message led up to the punchline. God kept all the promises He made in Jesus. Here is the Messiah that they have been waiting for and He came even though the people of God were not perfect. His message about the promises of God started where the people in his audience were that day and led them right to the fulfillment of the Messiah in Christ. What Saul wanted them to see was that the

life and ministry of Jesus were not something foreign to the Old Testament and the character of God. The salvation and grace that Jesus offered was the gift promised from the time of Adam and Eve throughout all the history of the Jews. Everything else led up to the work and gifts of the Messiah. He was the savior that God had promised and they had been expecting.

**7. Verse 27 How did God's people respond to God's greatest promise fulfilled? What kept the Jews from rejoicing in the promise fulfilled?**

Now the question comes up that was probably on their lips. If the Messiah did come, why was He not accepted and proclaimed in Jerusalem? Saul reminds them that not everyone will accept the grace of God. The leaders in Jerusalem like many of the ancestors of Israel often didn't welcome God's servants. They should have known from the Old Testament that Jesus was the Messiah. The crowds were amazed by the miracles and the teaching of Jesus which convinced many that He was from God. The leaders instead condemned Jesus despite clear signs like His ability to heal the blind (which only the Messiah was supposed to be able to do) and raise the dead. They knew the prophecies but rejected the one that God sent to save the world. Jesus just didn't fit in their concept of what God's Messiah should be like.

**8. Verse 27. What keeps people from accepting the offer of God's help and love when we share it with them? Why is it important that we still share the message?**

Like the Jews, you will encounter some who can't see the grace and mercy of the Lord. Sometimes, they may feel that the situation is too difficult for God to help. These are people who need to see that God is bigger than their problems. Others are afraid to trust God or are afraid to admit that they need God's help. The only thing that can stop God's care in our lives is us. We continue to share the message because there will be people who will be desperate enough to listen or who the Holy Spirit has been working on their hearts so that they are finally ready to listen. We keep sharing the love of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ so that it can slowly work on the lives of people who are struggling and bring joy to the lives that have been opened and are willing to trust in the Lord. God can do miracles if people will let Him work.

**9. Verse 30. What does Paul proclaim to show that God always keeps His promises and will not let any man stop His mercy?**

Saul now comes to the punchline. Mankind put Jesus to death but God raised Him from the dead. It was probably not what they were expecting but it was the most important part of the story. God did what was impossible for man. He kept His promise and brought the Messiah to life and salvation to mankind. He corroborates this truth by sharing the testimony of the witnesses who saw the risen Jesus. Lest anyone think that this was an accident, Saul quotes three Old Testament passages to show that the resurrection of the Messiah was God's plan all along. Mankind had rejected the Messiah but that did not stop God from fulfilling his plan and keeping His promise. Saul was saying like Peter did that wicked men put the Messiah to death but God raised Him (Acts 2:24-25). It was the ultimate demonstration of God's power and love for His people.

**10. Why do people need to know that God can and will do what He has promised? How will such faith change a person's future?**

No one wants to depend on someone who doesn't keep his promises. Those who are hurting need to hear that God can do miracles. If God was able to raise Jesus from the dead, there is nothing that He cannot do for them. If our Lord loved us enough to sacrifice His Son for us, there is nothing that we need that He will not do for us. It is the message that has changed the lives of millions of people over the centuries. The cross and resurrection are at the heart of all that we believe as God's people. It is the single act that has freed us from sin and demonstrated God's mercy for His people. If people get the message of the cross, they will be ready to accept that God will always care for us. Our witness can start with how God has kept

His promises to us but it needs to lead to the cross where we see how great God's love and mercy is for the people of the world.

**11. Verse 38. What promise is Paul able to give to the people because God has kept the past promises that He has made?**

The cross is the key to new life. Saul explains why the promise of the resurrection is so vital to their future. Through Jesus, they can have forgiveness of sins and a relationship with the Lord. The question was were they willing to accept this gift or would they turn away from it as the Jews had done in Jerusalem. No one is too broken or wicked for God to forgive. You only have to accept the promise that God has made and depend on Him for mercy. There are no catches with the cross. There are no restrictions to the life given at the resurrection. The law could not give them this mercy nor could it make them right with God. The cross was God's solution for sin and was the mercy that He had promised long ago. Believe in Jesus and you will have a new life free of guilt and filled with His power.

**12. What is the greatest gift that you can give to someone who is struggling in life? How is the new life in Christ a gift that keeps on giving?**

We often wish that we could do something for people who are hurting. We will try to give gifts to them or kind words. The greatest gift that we can give them is to remind them that the cross shows that Jesus keeps His promises. Here is the gift that keeps on giving. He will help them today and throughout their life. He will take them to be with Him in heaven when life is over. While many want help without really wanting Jesus, it doesn't work that way. Jesus is the key to life and help. He has the path through every trouble that we face but we have to be willing to trust and follow Him not expect Him to follow us. He has kept His promises in the past and those who live with Him as a daily part of their lives will find that they can depend on our Lord to keep His promises of provision and protection for the rest of their lives. God can be trusted.

**13. As you look at verses 44 and 45, what encouragement do you receive for sharing your faith and what warning do you see about the world's response?**

The power of the Holy Spirit is evident as the word of the Lord spread throughout the whole region. We are often afraid that people won't listen to us when we share the message of Jesus. Know that there will be people who will want to hear more about Jesus (v22-23). Some people are longing for the hope and joy that only the Lord can give. They are living in darkness and the light of Jesus shines brightly for them and brings comfort and encouragement. Just realize that not everyone will want to hear the words that you speak. Some will continue to be hard of heart and even cause problems for you as you share. Do not let them frighten you or keep you from bringing salvation to those ready to hear. Ask God for help with your message and focus on how God keeps His promises to help and how He sent His Son as the ultimate solution to our problems and the problems of the world.

**For now or later - taking the next step**

Deep 1 What are three times that God has helped you greatly in life. How does a remembrance of those blessings encourage you and provide you with encouragement for others?

Deep 2 Who do you know who needs to hear the message that God keeps His promises and will provide help for them as well?

Deep 3 What has kept you from sharing your faith in the past? In what ways has this text encouraged you to share the love of God and the resurrection with others?



## 5. Iconium – What does success look like?

Acts 14:1-7

**Big idea: If you are successful, there will be opposition**

Ministry is a dance in which you move forward and move backward as the Holy Spirit and Satan wrestle for the souls of mankind. As Paul and Barnabas speak in the synagogue, the power of the Holy Spirit is unleashed. The message of Jesus' death and resurrection changes hearts and a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. Satan retaliates by stirring up the Jews filling them with envy. Paul was stealing people from their assemblies and so they begin a smear campaign against Paul and Barnabas. Paul is not overcome but spoke boldly for the Lord and God confirmed their ministry with miracles. He was not going to give up the inroads that he was making in the lives of the people. Satan counters with division among the hearers and a threat to kill the apostles. Paul finally moves on to Lystra but has successfully left a church behind with people who were snatched from Satan. Soon the dance will begin again.

We picture Paul on four grand tours winning tens of thousands for Christ and wonder why our ministry isn't successful like that. One day, we will have great success as people come for worship or an evangelism event is effective. Other times, we fumble with a few in worship and lament how long we have served with little success. We err in thinking that Paul didn't have his bad days or that everything was perfect. Like our ministry, he danced with the gospel having good days and bad. We often forget that the church is in a battle with evil. Satan will not give up easily. He is powerful and seldom goes down with a fight. Christians will feel his wrath and it will be uncomfortable. Ministry is an ebb and flow of success and hardship.

It is easy to get quiet or to give up when we are attacked. We may even feel like the Lord has failed us because the ministry has taken a step backward. What is important is to never give up. The gospel cannot work if we don't share it. We can't let others silence our witness. Ironically, opposition often means that you are hitting Satan's kingdom hard and succeeding at wresting souls out of his hands. Never measure success by the ease of the ministry. This is a battle and our measure of success is persistence. Did we keep sharing the message of the gospel so that the Holy Spirit could work on their hearts? If you are successful, there will be opposition. Have the patience and keep going so that the Holy Spirit will free people from the clutches of Satan.

### **1. How would you define success at your workplace? How do you feel when success spawns jealousy or opposition from others?**

Most people would describe success as moving up the ladder in the company with an increase in pay and responsibilities. Under certain circumstances, it might be getting the job that you want and that matches your abilities and interests even if that means a pay cut. We expect that success will always mean moving up with few or no steps backward. We start at the bottom and work our way higher and higher. Others may not be so happy for us, especially if our upward mobility comes at their expense. Our goal would be to be humble about promotions and encouraging and compassionate to others who are struggling but that may be hard to do. Our ego and theirs may get in the way. Discuss what success would look like in your workplace and how you would try to deal with jealousy toward you or your jealousy of others.

**Read Acts 14:1-7**

### **2. Verse 1. What measure of success do Paul and Barnabas have as they come to Iconium? What do you suppose that success looked like in the city?**

Paul and Barnabas are asked to speak at the synagogue and the power of God is unleashed. Both Jews and Gentiles came to faith as they had in Pisidian Antioch just before the apostles came to the city (Acts 13:42f). The success must have been encouraging to the apostles since they had just been kicked out of Antioch. The message of the death and resurrection of Jesus changed hearts. I picture the two apostles overwhelmed by the response of so many to the gospel message. The city must have been filled with the news that something special was happening. Paul's message was passed from person to person so that soon a small crowd was coming to hear Paul and Barnabas talk about Jesus. This God was different and the message of a Savior who died for them showed a concern that was missing among the Roman and Greek gods.

**3. Verse 1. What does success in the church look like today? How do we normally measure success?**

When the church speaks of success, it usually means more people, more money, or more building. The church is growing and people are excited to be part of a church that is attracting people and is "going places". If we are to look at Paul, we need to ask if people are changing because of our message. We have a God who loves us and forgives us. Are people closer to the Lord than they were a year ago? Are they finding new ways to serve the Lord and show their commitment to Him? Has their character changed so that they are more like the Lord than they have been in the past? Our world is searching for meaning and answers. The church will help people grow by sharing how the Lord has loved them and helped them so that others want to be closer to our God and trust Him with their lives.

**4. Verse 2. What is the reaction of the Jews to Paul's message? How do they oppose God's work in their city?**

The same Jews who welcomed the apostles into their synagogue to speak are horrified with their message about Jesus. Jesus did not fit in with their ideas about the Old Testament's meaning and they were afraid of the teachings of the disciples. This Jesus was stealing good Jewish people and Gentile converts from the synagogue and the teachings of the Old Testament. They begin a smear campaign against Paul and Barnabas poisoning the minds of the people in their city. It was clear that Satan didn't want the town to be focused on Jesus. He had control of the hearts and minds of the city and was not ready to give up so easily. The message about Jesus must be silenced and so Satan used the Jewish leaders to attack Paul and Barnabas.

**5. Verse 2. When has Satan made ministry difficult for you and what did he use to try and make it fail?**

It is easy to think that ministry should never be difficult. We focus on the success of apostles and missionaries like Paul. As we see in the text, the church is involved in a battle for the hearts of men and women. Satan will do all that he can to keep control of the souls and lives of people. We may make progress as we witness or as we serve the community but Satan is powerful and will use whatever means that he needs to stop the mission of the gospel. Let the group share their experiences in ministry. I have known many pastors and laypeople who have had great success in ministry only to have things go bad. Each of us needs to know that it can happen because we have been successfully bringing the gospel to people. We may have done nothing wrong but are just opposing a powerful adversary.

**6. Verse 3a. How does Paul respond when ministry gets difficult? What is at stake for the apostles?**

Paul doesn't give in. Perhaps it was because they had been expelled from the last city or perhaps they saw the potential in Iconium. They spend a "considerable time" here proclaiming Christ and speaking on behalf of the Lord. Paul saw that he was making inroads in the lives of people and was not going to give up. He had already seen the power of the gospel and its ability to defeat Satan. He was willing to grapple for every soul in Iconium. Far from being intimidated, Paul was energized to continue the ministry so that

the church in this city would stand firm against all the opposition. God was giving them a measure of time that they may not have had in Antioch (Acts 13:49f) and Paul was determined to use it for the Lord.

**7. Verse 3a. When faced with ministry challenges, how do you and others respond? Why is it important to pull together and continue God's work?**

In ministry, we are often attacked when we least expect it. We are often attacked by the very people that we are trying to help. It is easy to get quiet and want to give up. That is exactly what Satan wants us to do. We have been making inroads on his kingdom and he wants us to just stop. God wants us to continue to talk about the gospel. We are not to be mean or retaliate against those who oppose us. We should be kind to those who are struggling to understand and firm with those who try to create doubt in others concerning our message. We can't allow others to keep us silent but should always feel ready to tell people about the wonderful things that Jesus is doing in your life. The world desperately needs to hear that the Savior has freed them from sin and that He wants to help them with the real problems that they face every day. Let the group share their experiences and how others have encouraged them.

**8. Verse 3b. How does the Lord affirm the message of the apostles before the people? What effect did it have on the community (verse 4)?**

In a world filled with skepticism, God gives the disciples a wonderful tool. He confirms the message with miracles and wonders. While faith is not to be based on miracles, it is often boosted by miraculous signs throughout scripture. Such miracles drew people to Jesus (Matthew 14:14) and the disciples (Acts 3:11) allowing Jesus or His disciples to proclaim the gospel message. Here was God's exclamation point to the gospel message. It should have silenced the Jews who were seeing the power of God firsthand. It probably caught the attention of the Gentiles who may have been ready to believe in a God who flexed His muscle and helped them in their needs. It showed everyone that the message Paul was speaking was not just his words but were affirmed by God Himself and filled with His power.

**9. Do you still believe God does miracles? What form can those miracles take for you or the church?**

A lot of Christians talk as if miracles are in the past and are not part of the church today. While few of us have seen the sick being healed or the dead raised as Jesus did, most of us have seen God do wonderful things. It might be that a dozen extra people show up for Christmas worship or that an unexpected gift allows you to feed people in the inner city. God regularly does work in the church that is unexpected or that allows us to do something we would not be able to do by ourselves. These miracles encourage those in the church and help them to see that the Lord is with them. They open up the hearts of others so that they are willing to listen to the message of the gospel because someone cared about them for the first time. God puts his "exclamation mark" on our ministry because He wants our ministry and witness to change lives and to heal the broken in our world. If you look for the signs, you will see them all over the church. What are some miracles that your group has seen regularly? How did they encourage believers and draw those who needed to hear the message of salvation?

**10. Verse 5 When the Jews can't discredit the message of Paul, what is their solution to their problem?**

I imagine that after a while, the Jews had experienced enough of Paul's ministry. Unable to silence or refute the words of Paul, they become brutal and desire to harm and kill the apostles. It was becoming a pattern for Paul. In Antioch, they expelled the apostles. Here they make plans to kill them. At the next stop, they will succeed in stoning Paul and think that they have killed him. His Galatian tour was a rousing success, at least in God's eyes. He may have been abused in many of the places where he witnessed but Paul continued to leave churches behind filled with people who were brought to faith and could continue to witness to their neighbors once Paul was gone. His success meant that hundreds of

thousands of people were exposed to the gospel and dozens of churches were planted across Asia and Europe. Even the attempt to take his life did not stop Paul from being effective for the Lord. God is not stopped that easily.

**11. How do you decide whether to stand firm or leave so that you can do God's work elsewhere?**

This is a tough decision to make and one that your group should discuss so that they are ready when it happens to them. Paul left Iconium when there was a threat to kill him. He was not so fortunate in the next town of Lystra where the crowd did stone him and left him for dead. He miraculously (?) gets up and goes back into town before he leaves the next day. I am not sure that there is a hard and fast rule. I doubt that the Lord wants us to die for our witness if we can avoid it without denying Him. I also am sure that the Lord wants us to continue witnessing and not give up at the first sign of resistance. Witnessing is never easy but is motivated by our desire to see souls won for Jesus Christ. There are times you will shake the dust off your feet in protest and leave (Acts 13:51) and there are times that you will speak even more boldly (Acts 14:3). Let the group talk more about what they would be willing to endure without guilt because I am not sure that there is a firm line for this decision.

**12. Verse 7. What is Paul's reaction to the opposition? What does that say about the importance of his ministry?**

Having been threatened, Paul keeps going on. His work was not in vain. A church was left behind and Paul would minister to these churches again on his second and third missionary journeys. He wasn't afraid to revisit these towns later. He wanted to strengthen the churches that he had left behind. If Paul had given up in the face of the opposition on his first missionary journey, none of the books of the Bible that were written by Paul would exist. The ministry that he had to the churches of Europe would never have happened either. His ministry had become his life. Yes, there were often two steps forward, and one step back as he faced persecution. Paul continued to persevere and slowly brought the message of salvation to a large part of the Roman world. He endured the persecution so that the gospel could be heard and God could get the glory.

**13. What do you think this passage says success looks like? What was Paul's measure of success in ministry? How will you measure success in the future?**

Many would not judge Paul as a success. He keeps getting thrown out of cities and threatened with death or imprisonment. His ministry was like a dance as he wrestled with Satan for the souls of mankind. Slowly, he chipped away at Satan's control of the hearts of people and left behind important churches in Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, and Corinth to name a few. The measure of a ministry is not in the moment but in what it accomplishes when you look back over decades. Did you bring people closer to Christ? Did people come to know the cross of Jesus and have the salvation that only Jesus can offer? We should not let Satan silence our ministry as he wrestles with the Holy Spirit. We should be wise for there is no reason to throw our lives away but we should also be patient and persistent in ministry so that the hearts of people are opened to the gospel. Talk in your group about what the dance might look like for you and what your community would look like if more people there knew the love of Jesus.

**For now or later - taking the next step**

Deep 1 What form of persecution do you fear most when you witness for the Lord?

Deep 2 How has the Lord encouraged you in ministry when things have gotten tough? What kind of encouragement do you need right now in ministry?

Deep 3 What would your community look like if half of your church witnessed to family and friends? What changes would you expect to see in the community or nation if more people believed in Jesus Christ?

## 6. Lystra and Derbe

Acts 14:8-20

**Know that Satan will attack a successful witness.**

As Paul and Barnabas travel into new regions for the witness of the gospel, they never know what to expect. The duo has had some great successes. They worked a miracle on Cyprus and the proconsul comes to faith (Acts 13:12). In Pisidian Antioch, the word of God spreads through the whole region but the Jews stirred up persecution. In Lystra, Paul will work a miracle and be worshipped as a god. When he rejects their worship, the people stone him and leave him for dead. The message of the gospel is powerful and Satan will not take it lying down. He will try to compromise the message and destroy the messenger. The battle that Paul has with Satan will continue for decades. Paul will make advances against the kingdom of the demons and they will counterattack to destroy him. Paul will be successful but he will pay a price for bringing others to Christ.

We witness on that same battlefield. The gospel is powerful and can change lives bringing them from the depths of sin and guilt into the kingdom of the Lord. Satan will counterattack at those times when things are going well. Suddenly, the church that was growing like gangbusters as it reached into the community has money problems, members leaving or being transferred with their jobs, or even internal problems and splits. Satan doesn't bother with churches that are not doing ministry and will close on their own inertia. He is afraid when a church is active and making inroads into the lost in their community. Such a church is attacking his kingdom and needs to be stopped. When a church is facing barriers to its witness, sometimes it is because the church is successful. Like Paul, we are sharing our faith and seeing converts and will face the attacks of the enemy.

We must continue to speak. The message will divide the community around us. Some will want to hear more because the truth of the Lord is liberating. Some may even become partners of the gospel as Timothy, who was a resident of Lystra, did for Paul. Others will reject the message and try to stop us from sharing the love and salvation of the Lord. Satan wants us to keep silent for the gospel has the power to destroy his kingdom. It is the sword of the Spirit that is our great offensive weapon in the battle for the souls of others. The more we speak, the weaker that the demons get. While some may try to turn our words and actions of love against us, we must continue to proclaim the love of Jesus so that may come to know of our God who loves them. Share the cross so that people may meet and know God. Our message is the way that people meet God and are freed by His truth and mercy.

### **1. What have you seen in life that you might call a miracle? How did it affect the people who saw it?**

While weeping statues and visions in the sky populate the news, many of us have had what we consider miracles. It may be healing that wasn't supposed to happen, a job that came out of the blue, or a person saved from an accident. I remember a couple of years ago when a woman had cancer and was supposed to die. We prayed for her and her cancer disappeared overnight. Her grandson was so impressed that he immediately asked to become a member of the church. Was it a miracle from God? I don't know. I do know that her cancer miraculously disappeared and it affected the family deeply. Let the group share stories from their lives. Be sure to share how it affected others around the person as well.

### **Read Acts 14:8-20**

### **2. Verse 9. How does Paul begin in Lystra and how does it change lives?**

Paul began preaching in the streets for there was no synagogue in Lystra. One imagines the two apostles holding conversations with anyone who would listen for several days in the marketplace and on the street corners to anyone who would listen. A lame man who had been crippled from birth overheard the

message and Paul's message produced faith. Paul noticed that the man was listening and sensed that the Holy Spirit was creating faith. The newly created faith set up the events for the rest of the story. It was nothing special for Paul was simply doing what the Lord called him to do. The message of the gospel is powerful and some people are hungry for answers and will listen to it and learn from it.

### **3. Verse 9. How must our ministry begin and what response can the Holy Spirit bring?**

Sometimes, I think we make it too hard. We plan elaborate programs after talking for hours about how we are going to save the world in meeting after meeting. Paul shows us that we just need to start having conversations about the gospel. We need to share what we have learned about the Savior and how He has impacted our lives. In the text, the people of Lystra had never heard the Old Testament message. They knew nothing about God and had never been to a synagogue for there was no synagogue in town. Like Paul, our message starts with common experiences of life and helps them see that there is a God who cares about them. The ministry may start small, but continued sharing will help it grow as the Holy Spirit works through the message and changes life. Like the lame man, we will find people whose life is struggling and who are eager for the hope that only the Lord can give. Some around us are eager for real answers to the problems that they face.

### **4. Verse 10. What does Paul do out of compassion? How does it validate the message that Paul has been preaching?**

Paul must have seen the pain in the man's eyes and had a desire to free him from his physical bondage. He is also perceptive at that moment. He made himself available to be used by God and sensitive to the seed of faith that was growing in the crippled man's heart. He looks the lame man in the eye and commands him to stand. Without faith, the man would have thought Paul a fool. It was the Holy Spirit that made the man believe and do the impossible. Here was a demonstration of the power and love of God that cracked the city wide open. Everyone knew that this man was lame since birth. His jumping to his feet and walking was unquestionably the work of God. People who ignored Paul and Barnabas before suddenly begin to focus on these men and their message. Here is an example of how God changes lives dramatically and the impact it has on others.

### **5. Verse 10. What often accompanies our witness and how does it enhance the message?**

It is often the kindness of God's people and the power of God that opens the hearts around us to the gospel. They see a church that reaches out to help others who have lost their job or who are struggling with illness. They see a church that is active with children in the schools and the community. Soon lives are changed by the love and power of God. The community watches as God frees people from their limitations and brings joy into their lives. At first, it is a few who want to know how this is possible. Later, others will want to understand what is going on. Our biggest mistake is that we do such good and never point people to the Lord as the reason for the changes. The witness must accompany our work if the power of the Lord is to be unleashed. Many people do good deeds. Christians speak about the Lord as they serve and unleash the power of God and open the door for the Spirit to change lives with the Gospel.

### **6. Verse 11. How does the crowd respond to the miracle? How do these pagans interpret what they have just seen?**

Satan must have been horrified by the power of the gospel for the city is on the verge of having a major revival. He focuses the people on the apostles instead of on God. The message is minimized and the miracle and the men are glorified. The pagans see the miracle through their Roman understanding of the gods. Barnabas must be Zeus and Paul is Mercury, his spokesman. They bring on the bulls and wreathes to worship the men because they don't want to anger the gods who have come into their midst. They recall a legend that the gods had visited Lystra before and because they were not recognized and worshipped, they killed a large number of the population. The current residents didn't want the



punishment to be repeated and so the whole city honored the apostles. Their superstitions clouded their perception and kept them from believing in God.

**7. Verse 11. What danger often accompanies success in ministry?**

Satan still likes to glorify the preacher or the church so that people forget about the Lord. We live in an era of “heroes” where we often focus on sports figures, entertainers, and titans of business like they were gods. Satan will let the church grow or the pastor be popular so that people start thinking of the great music or children’s program instead of the message in the sermon or the bible class. They see the miracles and men and not the God who works miracles through the message. People are attracted to the splendor and size of the congregation. They also want a church that is comfortable with an attractive building and coffee in the entryway. If you are successful, Satan will divert people so that God is pushed into the background and everything else is noticed and honored. Never let the word take second place for it is the power of the ministry. Everything else is secondary.

**8. Verse 15. How does Paul respond to their worship of him? What message does he share concerning their actions?**

Paul has only one response to their worship. He testifies to the true God. His message is not based on the Old Testament as it was in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16f) for these people did not know the scripture. Paul began with the witness of God’s creation around them. He focuses on how God is powerful, merciful, and just. This is a merciful God who has not destroyed you for your sin. He will want a reckoning for sin and so the people should come close and hear what God has done for them in the rain and seasons. This crowd that wanted to save themselves from the anger of the gods by worshipping the humans they thought were gods needed to hear a loving God who already cared for their needs. Paul begins with creation and encourages them to turn to the true God whose work they have seen around them. Paul would have liked to have gone further but his message is cut short.

**9. Why is it important to keep giving God glory amid success?**

Churches that grow over the long term continue to point to the Lord. They resist the temptation to do things bigger or in a more exciting way. Their time and money are spent on getting people into the scripture and helping them apply what they learn in service to God and others. At the center of these churches is the cross for this is the place where you see the love of the Lord. It is the cross that will change lives and help people have real hope. Churches that focus on a famous pastor may grow for a time but pastors retire or burnout from the constant pressure of having to be center stage. A church that focuses on the cross makes the transition to a new pastor and weathers changes in the community they serve for the heart of the church was never the pastor or style of worship, it was Jesus and His cross. When you glorify the Lord, the Holy Spirit has an opportunity to draw people to God and salvation.

**10. Verse 19. Poisoned by Jews from Antioch and Iconium, what does the crowd do next? Why do they reject the one that they just worshipped?**

Sadly, the gospel isn’t always what people want to hear. The miracle has given Paul a great forum to speak to the whole city. His message that the true God is greater than Zeus and the other gods of the Romans will win some to the Lord. Yet, others are upset that he rejects their glory and their gods. Paul had not fulfilled their expectations of material blessings from the gods. A group of Jews from other cities in Galatia is successful at persuading a fickle crowd so that they reject the message of Paul and stone the messenger himself. In 2 Cor. 11:25, Paul recalls being stoned once in his life. He is probably talking about this incident. Satan works to make people who loved Paul feel rejected and deceived. The crowd grows violent in Satan’s attempt to silence the message. They drag Paul’s body outside of the city as if it is garbage.

### **11. What are the risks to saints who witness today?**

While we seldom face deadly persecution, our very words are often turned against us. We try to proclaim the love of Jesus and are accused of being narrow-minded or hating others who are not like us. Satan still controls the hearts and minds of many so that they are closed to the gospel. He doesn't want people coming to faith. We can take it as a personal attack or realize that they are really angry at the Lord and His truth. Satan fears the message of salvation and lays a counter-attack against the message and the messenger. People will reject us and turn away from us because they don't want to hear the truth about their lives and the future. They may say hateful things and even retaliate in anger rather than facing the truth. Let the group discuss the rejection that they have faced when sharing the gospel message.

### **12. Dig 6 Verse 20-21. Despite the abuse, what does Paul do next? How does the Lord encourage Paul and the new disciples?**

I picture Barnabas and the disciples gathering around Paul and weeping over the death of their friend. These were new believers in Christ and this was a crisis that was sure to be shaking their faith. How surprised they must have been when Paul got up and goes back into the city. Whether Paul was dead and God raised him or badly hurt and the Lord healed him is up for discussion. The next day, Barnabas and Paul leave for Derbe some sixty miles to the southeast of Lystra. Paul's condition surely was a comfort to the disciples and an encouragement to their young faith. Despite the abuse, Paul will not stop sharing the gospel. He will return to this city and will meet Timothy in Lystra (Acts 16:1) on his second missionary journey. Paul will not let Satan stop the message of the gospel.

### **13. What does this story teach us about failure during success and how to handle it?**

Trouble will come when you think that things are going well. It is not a sign of defeat. It is a sign of the success of the gospel. Satan doesn't want the church or its messengers sharing the gospel. He will counterattack when he senses that the Lord is winning and taking people out of his kingdom into the kingdom of the Lord. He doesn't want people hearing about a loving God who sacrificed His Son on a cross so that they might be saved. Like Paul, we know that we have to continue to speak. There will be some that will hear the message and be saved. There may even be the next "Timothy" in the crowd who will hear the message and be ready to be a witness for Christ as well. Like Paul, we continue to speak the message and return to encourage those who have accepted the message so that they will share it with those that they know. Realize that the more we speak, the weaker Satan gets. The word of God is the sword of Spirit (Eph. 6:17) which can slice the demons to bits.

### **For now or later - taking the next step**

Deep 1 How would you begin a conversation about Christ with someone who has not heard the Bible stories? What differences would there be compared to a lapsed Christian?

Deep 2 What is your greatest fear in sharing the message of salvation with others? How do you think Satan would attack you?

Deep 3 How does the persistence of Paul and Barnabas encourage you to continue witnessing even when it becomes difficult?

## **1. Paul's Conversion**

### **Acts 9:1-19**

#### **Big idea: Aim for a relationship with God, not just being religious**

The story of Saul is the transition from religion to relationship. As we first see Saul in this chapter, we see an angry animal whose very breath is dangerous. Like other rabbis, he was jealous to protect the law and thought that Christ's followers should be put on trial and punished to keep the faith pure. Suddenly, Saul was on trial. The light shines from the heavens on his heart and reveals the blackness that was there. The judge of the Christians had become the accused of Christ. Blinded by the Shekinah light of God, Saul heard how the Lord wanted to have a relationship with him. After three days of fasting and pondering what had happened, God sent his servant Ananias to tell Saul that he was forgiven and chosen for the extraordinary task of bringing the gospel to the gentiles. He would open up the eyes of others as God opened Saul's eyes to see the truth.

Christianity is different than the religions of the world. Religion is built on rules and programs. Faith is built on a relationship with Jesus Christ. Many in the church think the church must be pure. The less than perfect should change, or the pious will discard them. They judge others for their weakness until crisis turns their worlds upside down, and they need a Savior who will help them in their weakness. The rules are swept away as we sit at the bedside of a loved one or try to pick up the pieces of a shattered life. We need a friend who will help us, and so God comes to us and gives us His healing and peace. With the rules set aside, God calls us to minister to the broken and hurting. He calls us to be His hands and feet, building relationships with others who need the grace of God in their misery.

If there is a difference between Saul the rabbi and Paul the great missionary, it is found in the contrast between religion and relationship. Saul, the Jew, felt the need to keep the Jewish doctrine pure and force people to keep the Old Testament rules. Paul had the purpose of bringing people to know Jesus Christ. The scales had fallen off his eyes, and he saw God in a new way. People didn't get to heaven by keeping the law but by the mercy of God. The church today is not about rules and holy living so that we can approach God. It is about building a relationship with God so that He might redeem us and rebuild us with His love. God takes us as we are and transforms us through a personal relationship called faith. God uses our faith relationship with God to build relationships between others and Him as we share the love of Christ with them. Salvation is all about the relationship between God and us.

#### **1. Who was the most intimidating person that you knew growing up?**

#### **Read Acts 9:1-19**

#### **2. Verse 1. What was Saul like before his conversion? What was the consuming purpose of his life?**

#### **3. Verse 1. Who are the rule keepers in your church? What are they looking for in the church?**

#### **4. Verse 4. How did the Lord break into Saul's life? What new insight did Saul gain?**

#### **5. Verse 4. How does God use a crisis to teach us and prepare us for more incredible ministry?**

**6. Verse 8. What was Saul like after his encounter with Jesus? What thoughts might have come to him in the three days of fasting and praying?**

**7. Verse 8. What can we do after we are broken that we find impossible to do before God's intervention?**

**8. Verse 13. How did Ananias feel about being asked to deliver the message? What would Christianity look like if Ananias had never approached Saul?**

**9. How open are you to welcoming new people into your church? What about them makes you afraid?**

**10. Verse 15. What is God's assignment for Saul? How would this require a relationship with God and not just rules?**

**11. What do you think God is calling you to do with your life? Why must ministry be based on a relationship with the Lord and not on the rules?**

**12. Verse 18. What change happened for Saul after he heard God's message?**

**13. What does Paul's experience teach you about the heart of ministry and the value of having a deeper relationship with Christ?**

**For now or later - taking the next step.**

Deep 1 In what ways have you held back from doing what God wants you to do? Why do you sometimes resist what God asks you to do?

Deep 2 If you had ever had a time (illness, job loss, etc.) when you had lots of extra time on your hands, what did you think about during that period? How could God have used that time to benefit your spiritual life and future?

Deep 3 What do you have to offer others who have not been Christians as long as you have? How could you be their guide when, like Saul, they are figuring out their way with Christ?

## **2. Saul: Excited for Christ**

**Acts 9:19-31**

**Big idea: The gospel is to be a fire that has to be shared!**

Saul just couldn't hold in the news about Jesus. Verse 20 says, "at once, he began to preach" In less than a week, Saul had gone from being one ready to destroy followers of Jesus to a man preaching on fire for Jesus among the Jews. He now knows Jesus is the Son of God. The Shekinah light on the Damascus Road lit up Saul's heart and put a fire in his soul. The change was so dramatic that it struck fear in the hearts of the Jewish community. The man who had come with letters from the High Priest in Jerusalem had turned against them. He never stopped talking about Jesus. Saul is the perfect example of what happens when God transforms a life. He converted many to faith because his life witnessed the gospel message of Jesus. Jesus had redeemed him, and Saul could not keep silent about the unexpected mercy of the Savior.

Saul is in stark contrast to most church members. We barely talk about our faith with others. We feel awkward about telling others about Jesus and may even think that people have a right to their opinion. The few that I have seen on fire for their faith are usually converts. One minute they are calm, and the next minute they are animated and talking about the change that Jesus has brought to their lives. They know what it is like to be without God's love and salvation. They have felt the pain of living in fear and shame and have experienced the rush of mercy and grace flood their darkness and hopeless lives. God has transformed them, and they have to tell people their story because they understand what it is to live without Jesus. It may be tough to go back and talk to their old friends, but they ache to help friends as God has helped them. The world has to know about God's love.

I feel a little guilty as I read this text. I ask myself when was the last time I was as excited about Jesus as Saul is here. Having been a Christian all my life, I have never known the darkness that Saul or the new Christian has known. You and I need to talk about Jesus with those who live in darkness or shame. Saul was excited because God had given him life instead of destroying him for persecuting Christians. We need to think about what life would be without Jesus' salvation or the daily chance to bring our cares to Him in prayer. Such meditation might help us see the need of others who don't have Jesus. Our witness could give people the benefits that we have had for a lifetime and bring a kinder and gentler world as well. Maybe it is time we became as excited as Saul so that others can have the mercy of the cross and love of God.

**1. What is something so near and dear to your heart that you would make a great sacrifice?**

**Read Acts 9:19-31**

**2. Verse 20. What change do we see in Saul after his conversion? What had Saul experienced that created this change?**

**3. Verse 20. Who do you know who has the excitement that Saul shows in this text?**

**4. Verse 21. What do you think that the Jews expected Saul to say when he spoke at the synagogue? How do they react to his words?**

- 5. Verse 21. What was powerful about Saul's testimony? What might impress you if you were to hear him today?**
- 6. Verse 23. How has the Lord turned Saul's life upside down by his conversion? Who must Saul rely on to spare his life?**
- 7. Verse 23. What are the dangers to a new convert who wants to share what the Lord has done for him? How can we help them through these trials?**
- 8. Verse 26. What reception does Saul get in Jerusalem from the leaders of the church? What reasons do you think that they had for being cautious with Saul?**
- 9. What concerns does the church have with new members who are excited about Jesus? In what ways can we help new converts mature so that they can serve better?**
- 10. Verse 27. Who intervenes on Saul's behalf, and what is his message about this new convert?**
- 11. Verse 29. What is the reaction of Saul's Jerusalem colleagues when he begins to speak about Jesus? How do you think that they saw the new Saul?**
- 12. What struggles do we often face when we speak to friends and family about Jesus? Conversely, what can convince them of the truth of your message?**
- 13. When have you been excited about Jesus like Saul is in the text? What steps could you take to reclaim your enthusiasm?**

**For now or later - taking the next step.**

**Deep 1** In what ways can new Christians have a profound witness to Christians and non-Christians?

**Deep 2** How would a Barnabas change the character of your church? In what ways would he be a blessing to newer members?

**Deep 3** Who is God calling you to share your faith with so that they can have the joy of Christ that you enjoy?



### **3. The strategy of the Spirit**

#### **Acts 13:1-12**

#### **Big idea: God opens our hearts and empowers His people for ministry**

What is next? The church centered in Jerusalem has fanned out to Syria and beyond due to persecution. They have begun to witness to Gentiles as well as Jews, and so we find these five men praying what is next. They are a diverse group from Cyprus, Africa, and modern Turkey. The leaders fast and pray because they want to know God's will for the future. Their hearts burn for the church and for those who don't know Jesus. They know that they should share the message of salvation, but they are not sure how. When God's call comes to them, they have been busy preaching and teaching. They have not sat idly but feel that the "What is next will be an extension of what they are already doing. They also know that they will not do it by themselves but that the whole church needs to get behind the ministry. They send Barnabas and Saul with the prayer and financial support that they need. God has a strategy, and they are ready to move forward.

It is a question that many churches struggle with, and some have given up finding the answer. What is next? Our world is changing just as it did in the time of the book of Acts. We see people struggling with busy lives and fractured families and values. Prayer has to bathe the question of what is next in the church. Our hearts must burn with a desire to bring the gospel to others so much that we regularly pray for the lost. Yet, you will not find God's direction if you sit in a cave and wait for it. It will grow out of the service that the Lord has called you to do. He will train you and connect you with others who will go on this journey with you. Oh, that the church would stop having meetings to discuss what they need to do and spend time in prayer together. God has the direction that we need to follow, and prayer and Bible study are how we will find God's path for the church and us. As God leads us into the future, we all need to support the shared ministry that the Lord has given. Encourage each other and work together. Use the gifts you have and the wisdom God has given you in your service to go into God's future boldly.

Now is the time to serve and to pray. God will call those who are already using their gifts in service to Him. He is training those people for even vaster opportunities in the future. He wants them to seek His will and not demand that God do our will or give us the possibilities we think we deserve. These are people who will pray and not plan. They will pray, asking what the Lord wants them to do in the future. They have a heart burning for ministry and trust the Lord to give them direction for their service. God is the only one who knows the strategy of how to reach a city, a county, or a nation. As each of us uses the gifts that we have, we need to open our hearts so that the Lord can bring us to even greater ministries. We will not discover them by ourselves but need to pray and search the scripture to know God's will and harness His power as we serve individually and as a church.

#### **1. How do you decide what you will do for vacation this coming year?**

#### **Read Acts 13:1-12**

#### **2. Context: What is the context of the text? What has happened that led the five men to pray about the future of the church?**

#### **3. Verse 1. Who are the five men gathered together, and what have they been doing in Antioch?**

- 4. Verse 1: What should you be doing as you wait for God to guide you to what is next in ministry? Why is this essential for success?**
  
- 5. Verse 2. How would you describe the heart of these men as they pray about the future?**
  
- 6. Verse 2: What is often missing as the church and its leaders think about the future of ministry together?**
  
- 7. Verse 3. God calls Barnabas and Saul for the first missionary journey. What do the others do, and why is this important for the success of the new ministry?**
  
- 8. Verse 3: How can the church serve those who God chooses for a new ministry?**
  
- 9. Verse 4. Where do the two missionaries go, and why did the Holy Spirit send them to those locations?**
  
- 10. How do experience and skills shape the ministry that God calls us to do?**
  
- 11. Verse 11. How does Saul respond to the first barrier to their ministry? What do Saul's words tell you about who is at work with them?**
  
- 12. Why is it so important that we lean on the Holy Spirit as we begin any ministry?**
  
- 13. How would you summarize God's strategy for ministry in these verses? Who does He call, and how will they know where God wants them to serve?**

**For now or later - taking the next step.**

Deep 1 How often do the leaders of your church pray together? Why is this essential if the church wants to serve the Lord, its members, and the community well?

Deep 2 What burns in your heart when you think of serving the Lord? What skills has the Lord given you that you are not using and what part of ministry intrigues you the most?

Deep 3 What skills and experience are you developing in ministry that the Lord could use in the future?

**4. In Pisidian Antioch**  
**Acts 13:13-45**  
**Big idea: It is all about Jesus**

What do you say when someone asks you to speak about the Bible? Saul and Barnabas have such an opportunity. It was customary for visiting teachers to speak at the synagogue. Saul could have softened the gospel so that he didn't offend anyone. Instead, they spoke boldly about Jesus. They began with Old Testament History showing the promises God had given to his people over 2000 years. Saul continues by showing how poorly the Jewish leaders treated the Messiah who came. Yet, God was not deterred. He did the impossible and raised Jesus from the dead. The Messiah that these Jews have been waiting for has come during their lifetime. God kept his promises through the giving of Jesus Christ. Now they could have forgiveness of sins and a new life in Jesus. It is the most important message that they can have in their life.

It is the most important message that you can share with others. People still need to know that God keeps His promises. We live in communities where a large number of people are hurting and think that God either can't or won't help them when they are in pain. God is seen as not caring about them. We need to help them see that God is willing to help. The Lord who sent His own son to die on a cross is not going to ignore us when we come to Him for help. We can't force them to turn to Jesus in their pain for many want help from Jesus without letting Jesus in their lives. However, millions have had their lives changed by the cross of Jesus. They have seen God's gracious act of kindness and have thrown themselves on his mercy because they believe that God will care for them in their pain. Jesus is the key to new life and help. Those who are hurting desperately need us to share the message of God's love so that they are open to His help.

What will you say when someone asks you to speak? Will you tell them that you are too busy to help them right now and suggest that they talk to an elder or the pastor of your church? Truth is that you are on deck and the Lord has called you to speak and help this person who needs God's mercy dealing with illness or a problem in life. What do you say? You could start, like Saul did, with all the promises that God has kept in your life. Let people see how God has helped you with your struggles so that they know God can help them with their problems. Don't belittle them or lecture them about how they need God. Let them see that God will help them if they let Him. You know of His power in your life and what God could do for them. Help them to see Jesus as a great friend who has already made the sacrifice of his life and who will continue to help them in their needs. You can't force them to accept Jesus' help but you can offer it and let the Holy Spirit work on their hearts and help them in their pains.

**1. What is the best piece of advice that you have ever been given?**

**Read Acts 13:13-45**

**2. Verse 15. What opportunity was Saul given when he came to Antioch? What was the focus of his message?**

**3. Verse 15. How do you respond when someone asks for your advice or encouragement at a time when they are hurting?**

- 4. Verse 17-19. How had God helped His people throughout history? What does that say about God's trustworthiness in difficult times?**
  
- 5. Verse 17-19. What are some items that could be on a list of times when God has helped you? How might sharing those blessings help someone who is struggling in life?**
  
- 6. Verse 23. What is the greatest promise that God kept for the people of Israel?**
  
- 7. Verse 27 How did God's people respond to God's greatest promise fulfilled? What kept the Jews from rejoicing in the promise fulfilled?**
  
- 8. Verse 27. What keeps people from accepting the offer of God's help and love when we share it with them? Why is it important that we still share the message?**
  
- 9. Verse 30. What does Paul proclaim to show that God always keeps His promises and will not let any man stop His mercy?**
  
- 10. Why do people need to know that God can and will do what He has promised? How will such faith change a person's future?**
  
- 11. Verse 38. What promise is Paul able to give to the people because God has kept the past promises that He has made?**
  
- 12. What is the greatest gift that you can give to someone who is struggling in life? How is the new life in Christ a gift that keeps on giving?**
  
- 13. As you look at verses 44 and 45, what encouragement do you receive for sharing your faith and what warning do you see about the world's response?**

**For now or later - taking the next step**

Deep 1 What are three times that God has helped you greatly in life. How does a remembrance of those blessings encourage you and provide you with encouragement for others?

Deep 2 Who do you know who needs to hear the message that God keeps His promises and will provide help for them as well?

Deep 3 What has kept you from sharing your faith in the past? In what ways has this text encouraged you to share the love of God and the resurrection with others?

## **5. Iconium – What does success look like?**

**Acts 14:1-7**

**Big idea: If you are successful, there will be opposition**

Ministry is a dance in which you move forward and move backward as the Holy Spirit and Satan wrestle for the souls of mankind. As Paul and Barnabas speak in the synagogue, the power of the Holy Spirit is unleashed. The message of Jesus' death and resurrection changes hearts and a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. Satan retaliates by stirring up the Jews filling them with envy. Paul was stealing people from their assemblies and so they begin a smear campaign against Paul and Barnabas. Paul is not overcome but spoke boldly for the Lord and God confirmed their ministry with miracles. He was not going to give up the inroads that he was making in the lives of the people. Satan counters with division among the hearers and a threat to kill the apostles. Paul finally moves on to Lystra but has successfully left a church behind with people who were snatched from Satan. Soon the dance will begin again.

We picture Paul on four grand tours winning tens of thousands for Christ and wonder why our ministry isn't successful like that. One day, we will have great success as people come for worship or an evangelism event is effective. Other times, we fumble with a few in worship and lament how long we have served with little success. We err in thinking that Paul didn't have his bad days or that everything was perfect. Like our ministry, he danced with the gospel having good days and bad. We often forget that the church is in a battle with evil. Satan will not give up easily. He is powerful and seldom goes down with a fight. Christians will feel his wrath and it will be uncomfortable. Ministry is an ebb and flow of success and hardship.

It is easy to get quiet or to give up when we are attacked. We may even feel like the Lord has failed us because the ministry has taken a step backward. What is important is to never give up. The gospel cannot work if we don't share it. We can't let others silence our witness. Ironically, opposition often means that you are hitting Satan's kingdom hard and succeeding at wresting souls out of his hands. Never measure success by the ease of the ministry. This is a battle and our measure of success is persistence. Did we keep sharing the message of the gospel so that the Holy Spirit could work on their hearts? If you are successful, there will be opposition. Have the patience and keep going so that the Holy Spirit will free people from the clutches of Satan.

**1. How would you define success at your workplace? How do you feel when success spawns jealousy or opposition from others?**

**Read Acts 14:1-7**

**2. Verse 1. What measure of success do Paul and Barnabas have as they come to Iconium? What do you suppose that success looked like in the city?**

**3. Verse 1. What does success in the church look like today? How do we normally measure success?**

**4. Verse 2. What is the reaction of the Jews to Paul's message? How do they oppose God's work in their city?**

5. Verse 2. When has Satan made ministry difficult for you and what did he use to try and make it fail?
6. Verse 3a. How does Paul respond when ministry gets difficult? What is at stake for the apostles?
7. Verse 3a. When faced with ministry challenges, how do you and others respond? Why is it important to pull together and continue God's work?
8. Verse 3b. How does the Lord affirm the message of the apostles before the people? What effect did it have on the community (verse 4)?
9. Do you still believe God does miracles? What form can those miracles take for you or the church?
10. Verse 5 When the Jews can't discredit the message of Paul, what is their solution to their problem?
11. How do you decide whether to stand firm or leave so that you can do God's work elsewhere?
12. Verse 7. What is Paul's reaction to the opposition? What does that say about the importance of his ministry?
13. What do you think this passage says success looks like? What was Paul's measure of success in ministry? How will you measure success in the future?

**For now or later - taking the next step**

Deep 1 What form of persecution do you fear most when you witness for the Lord?

Deep 2 How has the Lord encouraged you in ministry when things have gotten tough? What kind of encouragement do you need right now in ministry?

Deep 3 What would your community look like if half of your church witnessed to family and friends? What changes would you expect to see in the community or nation if more people believed in Jesus Christ?

## **6. Lystra and Derbe**

**Acts 14:8-20**

**Know that Satan will attack a successful witness.**

As Paul and Barnabas travel into new regions for the witness of the gospel, they never know what to expect. The duo has had some great successes. They worked a miracle on Cyprus and the proconsul comes to faith (Acts 13:12). In Pisidian Antioch, the word of God spreads through the whole region but the Jews stirred up persecution. In Lystra, Paul will work a miracle and be worshipped as a god. When he rejects their worship, the people stone him and leave him for dead. The message of the gospel is powerful and Satan will not take it lying down. He will try to compromise the message and destroy the messenger. The battle that Paul has with Satan will continue for decades. Paul will make advances against the kingdom of the demons and they will counterattack to destroy him. Paul will be successful but he will pay a price for bringing others to Christ.

We witness on that same battlefield. The gospel is powerful and can change lives bringing them from the depths of sin and guilt into the kingdom of the Lord. Satan will counterattack at those times when things are going well. Suddenly, the church that was growing like gangbusters as it reached into the community has money problems, members leaving or being transferred with their jobs, or even internal problems and splits. Satan doesn't bother with churches that are not doing ministry and will close on their own inertia. He is afraid when a church is active and making inroads into the lost in their community. Such a church is attacking his kingdom and needs to be stopped. When a church is facing barriers to its witness, sometimes it is because the church is successful. Like Paul, we are sharing our faith and seeing converts and will face the attacks of the enemy.

We must continue to speak. The message will divide the community around us. Some will want to hear more because the truth of the Lord is liberating. Some may even become partners of the gospel as Timothy, who was a resident of Lystra, did for Paul. Others will reject the message and try to stop us from sharing the love and salvation of the Lord. Satan wants us to keep silent for the gospel has the power to destroy his kingdom. It is the sword of the Spirit that is our great offensive weapon in the battle for the souls of others. The more we speak, the weaker that the demons get. While some may try to turn our words and actions of love against us, we must continue to proclaim the love of Jesus so that may come to know of our God who loves them. Share the cross so that people may meet and know God. Our message is the way that people meet God and are freed by His truth and mercy.

**1. What have you seen in life that you might call a miracle? How did it affect the people who saw it?**

**Read Acts 14:8-20**

**2. Verse 9. How does Paul begin in Lystra and how does it change lives?**

**3. Verse 9. How must our ministry begin and what response can the Holy Spirit bring?**

**4. Verse 10. What does Paul do out of compassion? How does it validate the message that Paul has been preaching?**



5. Verse 10. What often accompanies our witness and how does it enhance the message?
6. Verse 11. How does the crowd respond to the miracle? How do these pagans interpret what they have just seen?
7. Verse 11. What danger often accompanies success in ministry?
8. Verse 15. How does Paul respond to their worship of him? What message does he share concerning their actions?
9. Why is it important to keep giving God glory amid success?
10. Verse 19. Poisoned by Jews from Antioch and Iconium, what does the crowd do next? Why do they reject the one that they just worshipped?
11. What are the risks to saints who witness today?
12. Dig 6 Verse 20-21. Despite the abuse, what does Paul do next? How does the Lord encourage Paul and the new disciples?
13. What does this story teach us about failure during success and how to handle it?

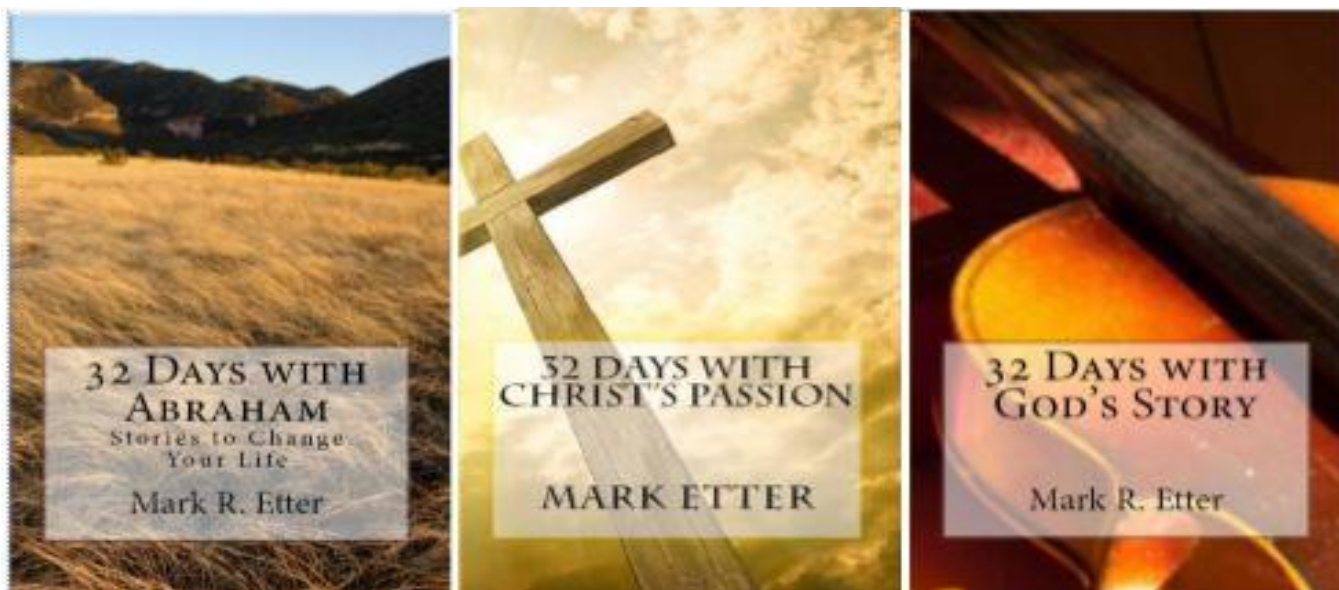
**For now or later - taking the next step**

Deep 1 How would you begin a conversation about Christ with someone who has not heard the Bible stories? What differences would there be compared to a lapsed Christian?

Deep 2 What is your greatest fear in sharing the message of salvation with others? How do you think Satan would attack you?

Deep 3 How does the persistence of Paul and Barnabas encourage you to continue witnessing even when it becomes difficult?

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### **About the author**

Rev. Mark Etter has been a pastor for over thirty-five years and is currently the pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Erlanger, KY. Rev. Etter has published several books of Adult Bible studies and numerous devotions and youth studies with Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis. He has been active in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod as an LWML counselor, evangelism chairman, coach for pastors, and circuit counselor. He and his wife, Joan, have three grown children and two grandchildren.

## Did you know?

*Here are seven questions that are answered in this study. The page and question number in this study are given after each question.*

- 1. How does God use a crisis to teach us and prepare us for ministry?** (Page 6, Question 5)
- 2. What was powerful about Saul's testimony? What might impress you if you heard him today?** (Page 10, Question 5)
- 3. What should you be doing as you wait for God to guide you concerning what you do next in ministry? Why is this essential for success?** (Page 14, Question 4)
- 4. How do experience and skills shape the ministry that God calls you to do?** (Page 15, Question 10)
- 5. What keeps people from accepting the offer of God's help and love when we share it with them?** (Page 19, Question 8)
- 6. How do you decide whether to stand firm or leave and do the work of God elsewhere?** (Page 24, Question 11)
- 7. Why is it important to keep giving God glory amid success?** (Page 27, Question 9)

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