



Sermon Series by Season

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Vol. 1 Part B
Lent through Pentecost Sunday

“Places of the Passion”
“Paul’s first missionary journey”

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The purpose of this volume.

Churches are often vacant for long periods or are in locations where it is difficult to find pastors to fill the pulpit when they are vacant. This series of four books is my humble attempt to help vacant congregations. The fifty-nine sermons, divided into four sections by the seasons, will give congregations an option on Sundays that it is hard to get a pastor. The sermons are arranged in series covering a specific section of scripture or topic. Some are meant to cover a season. Others will fill the long weeks between Pentecost and the beginning of Advent.

This is the second of four volumes of sermons that will cover the church year. The 59 sermons in the volumes can be used during the season indicated or as a sermon series at any time of the year. There is no cost to use these sermons and so I encourage you to freely use them with or without citation of authorship. God gave them as a gift to us at Bethany and we want to pass them on to you. Feel free to pass them on to others so that as many as possible may share in what the Lord has given all of us. You are also allowed to edit them to fit your specific location or your style of preaching. May the Lord bless you as you learn and grow from His word.

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Lent – Places of the Passion

In the gospel of Mark, the passion of Jesus can be defined by the places that Jesus visited. Each of these places in or near Jerusalem has important lessons to teach us about Jesus and ourselves. We will learn what it took for Jesus to be our savior and how we should treat Him because of His sacrifice for us. We will see the plan of Satan unfold and the weakness of the disciples revealed. Most of all we will see the great love of our Savior so that we might respond to His love with our love for Him. This is not just another colorful story but a chance to understand Jesus' ministry and build a relationship with Him. We will grow as we walk from place to place with our Savior and learn how to defeat evil in our own lives. This is the story of the hope that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus bring to each of us.

1. Bethany - Honor

Mark 14:1-11

Big idea: Evil can make a stand, but love stands out

Mark 14:1-11 Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. ² "But not during the Feast," they said, "or the people may riot." ³ While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. ⁴ Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume?" ⁵ It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly. ⁶ "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷ The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. ⁸ She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. ⁹ I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." ¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. ¹¹ They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Evil makes a stand

They want to destroy Jesus v. 1 *Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him.*

It just wasn't safe for Jesus to go to Jerusalem. The raising of Lazarus from the dead only weeks before had stirred up the Jewish leaders. It was one thing when He did his miracles up in Galilee. It was another when He did them under their nose in Bethany, just a few miles away from Jerusalem. They had to eliminate this Jesus since He undermined their whole religious system and threatened their power. It made them look bad and selfish. He just had to go so they could continue living wealthy lives and controlling the people in the name of God.

You can feel the plan of evil in the text. The Jewish leaders want Jesus dead, and they want it bad. They were ready to take a stand so that they could destroy him. It was Satan moving them, of course, and in the end, Judas would give them the way to accomplish the evil they wanted. Jesus knew what waited for him. While most would not have considered going to Jerusalem a bright idea because of the evil lurking there, Jesus knew that love would stand out and change the world. Jesus' actions here show us our big idea: Evil can make a stand, but love stands out. Nothing would defeat that love.

How can I live out my faith in such an evil world?

Evil surrounds those who want to do good things in our world. Christians wonder how they can be expected to live out their faith in such a cruel world. They are scared that if they live out their faith, they will be attacked for it somehow. I think they are correct, but that should not keep us from sharing our faith in love. We fret over living our faith in the workplace. We fret over living our faith in our community. Immorality is the norm, and people mock us for staying in tough marriages or for not being pushy about our rights.

It can be hard to be caring and moral. It can be hard to teach our children what is right and wrong when the world no longer has a moral code. Most of all, it is sometimes hard to love. People in our world are selfish, and showing tenderness to our Lord and others seems to take away from our portion since few others share such love. We think that we have to be as hard-nosed as others, but the text shows us something different. It shows us a person whose love stands out. It shows us a person in the passion story whose love for Jesus responded to the love that He offers to us. Hers was an evil world, but her devotion stood out, and she is a model for us when we find it hard to love.

Love stands out

An act of extravagant love v.3 *While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.*

The Passover is close, and Jesus has stopped to see some of his friends in Bethany. A banquet is held in honor of Jesus by Simon the Leper. Suddenly a woman comes in with a jar of expensive perfume and pours it on the feet and head of Jesus as an act of love. It is an extravagant gift. We are told in the text that it was worth a year's worth of wages. The woman is probably Mary, whose brother, Lazarus, was raised from the dead by Jesus just a few weeks before. It is a gift of love for Jesus because of all He means to her. It is her faith and love in action for all to see.

Think of what it would mean to give such a gift today. It would mean giving the equivalent of a year's worth of your salary. It would be giving a year of your life to volunteer for a mission project or to help someone in need. Few would be willing to give a gift like hers. Love for the Lord is not only spoken. It is shown. It is giving up something that costs us dearly. You give it up because, like Mary, you feel in your heart a love for Jesus and realize that Jesus has given you more than you can ever repay. You don't just give a little. You give a lot and give it gladly and willingly because you love Jesus.

Some think such love is a waste v.4 *Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume?"*

As she breaks open the neck of the vase, the banquet explodes with people indignant about this waste. Judas led the charge when she poured perfume worth a year's salary on Jesus and others took up the chorus. They couldn't see the point of such extravagance. There was also an ulterior motive for Judas. The gospel of John tells us he was a thief. If Jesus had sold the perfume, the money would have ended up in the disciple's treasury, where Judas could steal part of it. It did little good for anyone, especially Judas, on the floor and the couch.

Know this; no good deed goes unpunished. There will always be people who will criticize you when you give a considerable monetary gift to the church, when you commit to a big project in service to the Lord, or help someone with a task that will take a lot of time and effort. Sadly, there will be people who don't understand. They will think you are crazy for spending every Sunday afternoon or night helping someone. They will not comprehend why you want to give to the church instead of buying a new car or a plasma TV. So why waste your time and money on Jesus?

Jesus is honored by such love v.6 *"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me."*

In the text, Jesus immediately rebukes the disciples. He is honored by what she has done. This woman alone fears the danger in Jerusalem and perhaps has taken his warnings about his upcoming death seriously. She wants to show her love while there is still time, for he has given her so much. As you serve Jesus generously, know that he will protect you. People may criticize, but Jesus will provide you with such joy and satisfaction in your service that their words will ring empty. He will shield you as you give yourself to him so that you can complete the task from your heart.

Know, too, that Jesus will praise you. In the text, he praises Mary for her love and sets her as an example. People will see what you have done and will respect you for it. They will see the praise that the Lord surrounds His servant with and will be encouraged to follow your example. Finally, Christ will help you and others understand the purpose of your ministry. Mary's feelings were right. Jesus was going to die. She would anoint his body in life while others could only prepare it in death. Jesus will help people understand the effect that your ministry has. Having honored Christ with your gift, Christ often honors the givers in return.

The power of such love

Love is given in a timely manner v.8 *She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.*

Such love has power. First, it seizes the moment for maximum effectiveness. Think about it; this may have been the first time that Mary saw Jesus after he had raised her brother from the dead. She may have also been concerned that it would be the last time she saw him alive before he died. So she took what she had and showed her love. The vase may have contained oil to be sold for her dowry or been a family heirloom. She didn't hesitate but took what she had and showed her love. Its meaning would have been different at an earlier or later date. The gift was one of pure emotion and love.

Sometimes, the greatest gifts are those we give on the spur of the moment. We see someone struggling to shovel their driveway, and you give up your afternoon to help them. You visit someone in the hospital and empty your wallet so that family members who came suddenly can eat. Love isn't always calculated, and it sure doesn't come at times that fit easily into our schedules. But such love has power because it came when people needed it most. It sees a need and uses what it has because we love Jesus. It helps when help is needed, not when it is easiest for us. Aid often comes with sacrifices of our time and money at inconvenient times.

Love changes the world v.9 *I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."*

Such love is powerful because it changes the world. Three of the four gospels tell this story. It just stuck with the disciples and became a lesson that changed them all. They remembered 30 or more years later when they wrote the gospels of the kindness of Mary while they were all worried about the expense. The message in the gospels has been something that has touched millions of people since the gospel was first written. People like us have been encouraged to show love and kindness to others and to put Jesus first in their lives. Mary didn't even begin to realize the influence that her love would have.

We often complain about how our world is getting worse. Yet we forget that we have the power to change it. Lasting change will not happen in big government programs where billions and trillions of dollars are spent and often wasted. Instead, it happens as one person touches another in love. Even more powerful is a special act of kindness done in Jesus' name. His love can change a life, turn a child around, or reclaim someone who has left the Lord. It can have an impact that goes on for years, and people will never forget your actions. The love of Jesus changes the world.

2. Gethsemane – prayer

Mark 14:32-42

Big idea: When God asks the unthinkable, it is time to pray.

Mark 14:32-42 They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." ³³ He took Peter, James, and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. ³⁴ "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." ³⁵ Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. ³⁶ "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." ³⁷ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?" ³⁸ Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." ³⁹ Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. ⁴⁰ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹ Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

The myth: God's people naturally do His will.

Jesus struggled to do the unthinkable Hebrews 5:7-8 *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.*

Hiding in the bushes, Mark, the writer of this gospel, probably could not believe his eyes. He saw Jesus struggling with what God had asked of him. Here we find Jesus in his second hardest hour. Luke tells us that drops of blood dripped from His forehead as He was in anguish. If that seems strange to you, you are not alone. Many Christians believe that going to the cross was easy for Jesus because He was God. We think of Him as a stoic person who never struggled and never needed any help. He is God, after all. God should have no problem with anything, right?

Yet, He was a man as well. The author of the Hebrews tells us about the loud cries and tears that the human Jesus lifted toward heaven. He pleaded with the Father for hours that there must be a different way. Must He face the pain of hell and die? Imagine the pain of knowing exactly how you would die slowly and painfully the next day. Yet, He knew what to do in the face of being asked to do the unthinkable. Jesus purposely led the disciples out to the garden and began to pray. If He was going to finish the task that the Father had given Him, He needed to pray. Remember, When God asks the unthinkable, it is time to pray.

Obedience is not easy.

It was God's will, not Jesus' desire to die v.34 *"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."*

He had always been in control. The Pharisees questioned and attacked him, and he answered their questions in a way that showed their ugly motives. Demons would interrupt or confront him, and a single word would silence them and defeat them. Yet, he was in sorrow tonight and wasn't hiding it. For the first time, the human side of Jesus struggled with what the Father wanted him to do. He had known the cross was coming, but now the hour was on him. Fear and sadness had overcome him. Inside, he may have wanted to run away so that Judas and the others could not arrest him. It was not easy to die.

Obedience is not always easy. You know you should help your next-door neighbor who has just lost a husband. You know that you should talk to the angry coworker who always rubs you the wrong way. You are a natural talker, but the words just don't come out. It will be hard. God often asks you to do what is difficult. He wants you to help a neighbor or a coworker who is not easy to deal with. Racked with guilt

when it is clear what the Lord would have you do and clear what you want to do. You are torn between doing something for yourself and making a sacrifice because that is what good Christians do; you just want to run away. What can you do?

Jesus' answer to doubt is prayer v.35 *Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him.*

Jesus' answer to it all was to pray. In the text, he purposely leaves the dinner and takes his disciples to a grove of olive trees, where they often come for teaching and prayer. In the quiet, he could talk to the Father and lay all his fears before Him. In the quiet, he could draw strength from the father so that he could do what the Father had asked of him. He would throw himself on the mercy of God and seek the strength to do the Father's will. He could not go to the cross on his strength but only on the strength that the Father gave him.

Likewise, our answer in times when our will is not what the Father has in mind is to pray. We need to pray that the Father will give us the words we need to speak to the difficult people in our lives. We need to pray that the Father will give us the courage to do the hard things in life. The answer to our doubts is to find a quiet place where we can spend some time with the Father in prayer. We need to let him calm our fears and hear our concerns. Then, we need to lay it all out before him so that he can give us the strength and courage to do what he has asked. We cannot do it by our strength but by the power that the Lord gives us in times of prayer. Luke tells us that God sent an angel to come and touch Jesus and strengthen him in his prayer. So, likewise, God will send his strength to those who honestly look to him for help when he asks difficult things.

The mind knows God's will is best, but emotions struggle v.36 *"Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."*

The problem is often our feelings. Jesus knew God's will, but his emotions were still afraid of dying. In this time of prayer, the Father calmed the emotions of the Son. He strengthened his resolve for the task they had planned from the beginning. In that prayer, Jesus perhaps saw the great things that would happen through his suffering and death. No, it would not be easy, but the Father's work for him would accomplish much for all the people he loved. He knew God's will was best and, through prayer, was now ready to do God's will.

Sometimes we know what is best, but emotions get in the way. We feel guilt, anger, jealousy, and a host of other emotions. Our emotions cause us to be afraid and not follow through with what we know we should do. In prayer, God helps me see why I need to take on the task he has given me. He helps me see why his will is best. God then gives me the courage to go forward and do what he asked me to do. I go, not because I am afraid of God, but because he has encouraged me with his love. I go because I am confident that he will go with me to protect me from harm and give me the words and actions that are needed.

A contrast in power

The disciples rely on their own power v.37 *Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?"*

Why is such prayer so necessary? All you have to do is look at the disciples in the text. Earlier that night, Peter had boldly proclaimed that he would never disown Jesus but would stand faithfully at his side. Jesus had taken the three closest disciples into the center of the garden so that they could help him pray. All three had let Jesus down and had fallen asleep. Satan does not have to work hard to overcome Peter and the others. He tempts them to sleep and keeps them from praying so that they will not be ready for the challenges they will face on Thursday and Friday. He makes them rely on their own strength.

You cannot defeat Satan with human power. Others tell us to be strong men or women and muster up self-discipline from within ourselves. Seldom does that ever work for us. Satan has too many weapons in

his arsenal. He can use our emotions like anger or jealousy. Our adversary can make us tired or bored with something God wants us to do. He can use temptations like greed or lust to make us think only of ourselves. We cannot fight him in all those arenas. If we rely on our power as the disciples did, we will fail when it comes to temptations and doing God's will instead of our own will. The spirit is willing – we know what God wants and why, but the flesh is weak and is easily swayed by the master tempter.

Jesus keeps returning to God's power in prayer v.39 *Once more, he went away and prayed the same thing.*

Jesus knows the power of prayer. He prays not once but three times in the garden, only being interrupted when he checks on the three disciples he has brought with him so that he can encourage them to pray. Our Lord will pray for several hours in the garden that night. He will pray again and again for the same thing. Father, give me the courage and strength to go to the cross. Help me trust in you that I will rise from the dead and not be forgotten for all time. In the end, the Father gave him what he desired.

To rely on the power of the Lord is to have prayers in times of trouble measured in hours, not seconds. Our heavenly father never minds taking time for us in prayer. He knows that we must lay our fears before him repeatedly. He knows that we have to wrestle with our doubts and temptations. He knows that he may give us strength so that we commit to doing his will only to find us back in prayer with doubts all over again. A prayer is a simple act, but it brings the transforming power of the Lord into our lives, driving Satan and his thoughts away from our lives and filling us with God's energy. Prayer is our extension cord connecting us with help from the throne of the almighty God.

Prayer breeds trust and obedience v.42 *Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"*

Here in the garden, Jesus told his disciples to rise. Judas was coming with the mob, and the time of the arrest was upon them. He would be beaten and crucified just as was the Father's will, but he would also rise from the dead and be glorified. He trusts in the Father, and God's will won out in prayer. I know that there are times when I have prayed, "I'm scared, and I don't think I can do this, but I am going to try because I know that it is God's will." I wonder if Jesus still had those fears going as Judas came. It was a scary situation. He was able to obey because of His time in prayer with the Father.

What I know happened for Jesus and sometimes happens for me is that my trust in the Heavenly Father is greater than my fear. Yes, I am still afraid, but I know the Father is going with me, and he can handle the things I cannot do. God will continue to ask tasks of us that are greater than anything we can do ourselves. He wants us to have greater benefits and blessings than we can have by ourselves. Just remember Jesus' secret weapon. When God asks the unthinkable, it is time to pray. He will give you all the help you need.

3. High priest's home – false evidence

Mark 14:53-65

Big idea: When surrounded by evil, don't give in.

Mark 14:53-65 They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law came together. ⁵⁴ Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire. ⁵⁵ The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. ⁵⁶ Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree. ⁵⁷ Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: ⁵⁸ "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man.'" ⁵⁹ Yet even then their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰ Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" ⁶¹ But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" ⁶² "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶³ The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. ⁶⁴ "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death. ⁶⁵ Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him.

Evil surrounds us, seeking to destroy us.

Jesus' trial was a mockery v.53. *They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law came together.*

The place was packed. The seventy men of the Sanhedrin were there with their aides and scribes packed into the home of Caiaphas, the High priest. They had been waiting for this day when they could destroy Jesus for all the pain that he had caused them. The home was ornate with tile frescos on the floor, elaborate tapestries hanging on the walls, and specially made furniture and baths so that they could keep ceremonially clean. It was the trappings of royalty, for that is who the Sadducees were, and Caiaphas, the High priest, was near the top of them all.

It was that wealth and power for which they were fighting. This common rabbi had stirred up the crowd and had their admiration. The Sanhedrin couldn't figure out how he did those miracles. Surely, it must be the power of the demons, for he seemed destined to shake up their whole religious system. And that stunt he did the other day when he drove out the lucrative sellers of animals, and the moneychangers was the last straw. They must break him down to get Pilate to condemn him to death. They must break him down and discredit him so they can again have the people's hearts. Yet, Jesus would triumph that night for one simple reason. When surrounded by evil, he didn't give in.

Where are justice and honesty in our world?

Evil is all around us. The credit card company is finding new ways to increase revenues without concern about how it affects customers. Politicians slander a competitor or manipulate the voters. An acquaintance uses us to gain an advantage at work or in life. Evil is all around us, and the government seems to think it can protect the people from the likes of large companies and third-world dictators when some of the most self-serving people are in Washington. Evil bombards us like never before. There is no place to hide.

Our natural response is to be as crafty and mean-spirited as they are. People fight back against the social evils of our world by picketing them and going on talk shows and, once in a while, shooting evil doctors or running a plane into the IRS building. Yet, it destroys the victim more than those who perpetrate evil. It takes away the high ground and brings Christians to evil's level. It keeps us from using the tools the Lord has given us to defeat them because we have become just as bad as they are. Evil can

destroy us by making us evil. So today, we will focus on a simple principle: When surrounded by evil, don't give in.

Jesus deals with evil and wins.

Expect evil to play dirty v.55 *The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any.*

One would have expected that Jesus would get a fair trial. Unfortunately, Satan and his evil minions would never let that happen. The outcome of the trial was determined long before they gathered. The chief priests were determined to look for testimony that would convict Jesus. They held the trial at night when Jewish law insisted that trials would be during the day and at Caiaphas' home instead of the courtroom in the temple. Finally, they reached the verdict even before the trial began. All were against the law and showed how much they wanted Jesus dead.

Expect evil to play dirty in your life. It has come to the point where a person's word is meaningless. Even in a contract, there will be hidden phrases and double meanings. Corporations will tell us that safety is essential when their actions are about profits and being the biggest. Politicians are to be our watchdogs but manipulate the voter and each other like all the rest. People are out to manipulate us into buying their products or supporting their causes. Sadly, it is often a simple matter of profit and power. Buyer beware has become the watchword. Skepticism has become our motto in a world where few try to play fair.

Don't respond evil for evil v.60 *Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?"*

Somehow you would imagine that Jesus would have used his almighty power to even the score. A bolt of lightning sent here at the trial or a sudden plague among His accusers who lied and mistreated him would be just. He was, after all, the Son of God and deserved better. Yet, he just kept quiet and let the evil destroy itself. Those offering false testimonies could not agree with one another. The evil opposition was getting frustrated and turning on itself because Jesus would not panic or give them something they could use against him.

The first rule we see here for dealing with evil is that we can't respond with evil. The Holy God Jesus had every right to judge them and to destroy those who were doing wrong. We don't have that luxury. Sinful people like us can't afford to throw stones. It makes us just like the evil that we are opposing. Jesus knows that you can't beat evil with evil. You may win the battle, but you lose the war. You become known as someone as wicked as the people that you oppose. You become someone that others don't want to trust. The way to beat evil is to be quiet and let them defeat themselves.

Tell the truth even when it hurts v.62 *"I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

You often beat them with the truth. The high priest is frustrated, and Jesus is about to slip out of his hands. He turns to something illegal even today. The high priest calls on Jesus to answer a question and incriminate himself. "Are you the Christ, the son of God?" he asks. Jesus is under solemn oath and must respond. To keep quiet at this question is to make it seem like the statement is just as false as the ones that have come before it. Jesus must answer since this statement is true. And so he answers boldly, invoking the sacred name of God, "I am," in his response. Our Lord knows that His answer will seal his fate. They will charge him based on his own words, but he must not keep silent and deny the Father or himself.

In our society, we often think it is all right to hide the truth as long as you don't lie. People get off in court because no one thinks to ask the right question. Contracts leave out basic facts so that they can get you later. Yet, that is not God's way. You tell the truth and the whole truth. You want no regrets later on. The honest truth will show a lie told by others for what it is. Yes, there will be people who will gain in the short term when we speak the truth, yet the truth honestly and lovingly told will defeat a lie in the long run. It has the power of God standing behind it.

Two things to remember

Give away worldly things, not heavenly things

Jesus did not let them take away the things that made him Jesus. If he had become evil as they wished, he could not have been our Savior or Lord. Our Savior stood with his goodness and kindness intact. I am sure someone watching would have wondered how he could be so loving when everyone else was evil. He would tell us to give away our money rather than our character. If someone has cheated us out of a few dollars, is it worth screaming in their face and being as ugly as they are? Shouldn't we take our business elsewhere, leaving everyone to know that they were the dirty dog and not you?

Jesus would also tell us to let others take the credit rather than us selling our souls to get acknowledgment. Others will find out they didn't do the work or come up with the idea. They will fall, and you will quietly prosper. Why look like a fool asking for the honor when people often don't care? Give away the things of the world. They will not last and are not worth the effort. Keep a pure character, a humble disposition, and a loving personality. People will remember you for those qualities and want to be around you. Eventually, you will have others promote you instead of destroying yourself.

Expect God to triumph over evil v.62 *"I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

Finally, expect that God will triumph. The words that Jesus speaks to Caiaphas are some of the most haunting of the Bible. With these words, he prophesies that the roles will one day be reversed, and Caiaphas will answer to Jesus as his judge on the last day. Caiaphas thinks he has won, but a resurrected Jesus will not be defeated. The Jews will try to silence the faith in the book of Acts and find a disciple after a disciple willing to die rather than reject Jesus. And on the last day, Caiaphas will have the terror of all time as he looks into the eyes of the almighty Jesus.

Sometimes when evil comes calling, we just have to pray and place our ministry's future in the hands of our Lord. No evil in the world can oppose Jesus for long. Evil may make life uncomfortable, but we must let the Lord deal with it. We must go forward living our life in his purity and honesty, confident that the Father will bring evil under his control and his hand. If we are doing the work of God as Jesus was, we need to be confident that the Lord will stand by our side. He will take even the bleakest situation and bring glory for the faith from it.

Who was the winner – Caiaphas or Peter? *Matthew 16:26 What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?*

Caiaphas would rule as a High priest for only six more years after Jesus was crucified. The Romans sacked Pilate and Caiaphas in the same year, taking them both out of power and putting others in their place. Gone would be their power, and they would now be at the mercy of others. In 1990, the bones of Caiaphas were discovered in a limestone box during construction in Jerusalem. Christians have dishonored his name for centuries. His glory is gone, and all that is left of him is a fancy box that he will lose on the last day. According to Jesus, his destiny is hell; all he gained was lost.

Peter's tomb has also been authenticated in recent years. It sits below the current Vatican in Rome. Peter would stand up for truth and die in Rome. Yet, the early church honored him from the very beginning. He was not perfect, but he showed the qualities of Jesus from the very beginning. Who was the winner? Caiaphas struggled to keep all the power and wealth he had in whatever way it took, yet it only lasted six more years. Peter gave up all of those things for Jesus. He wanted to live out his life in the power of the gospel. In the end, he followed Jesus. When surrounded by evil, don't give in.

4. Courtyard – denial

Mark 14:66-72

Big idea: When we go alone, we will fall into temptation

Mark 14:66-72 While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. ⁶⁷ When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. ⁶⁸ But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. ⁶⁹ When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." ⁷⁰ Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." ⁷¹ He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." ⁷² Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

Temptation happens when you least expect it.

What did Peter hope to accomplish? V.54 *Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire.*

What was Peter thinking of when he entered the High Priest's courtyard? I will give you one scenario. The other disciple, who many believe is John, decides to know what is happening to Jesus. Peter brashly thinks, "You are not going without me." So Peter, cocky from the fact that he has been the leader of the disciples, boldly goes where he should not go. John is known by the High priest's staff and gets in immediately. Peter has to wait till John gets him into the courtyard, and then John leaves him all alone in the middle of soldiers and servants.

Minutes turn to an hour or two, and the nerve wears off. Peter hears the shouting in the trial and maybe even hears Jesus slapped and beaten. All his trust in Jesus evaporates. Satan has many tools in his arsenal on this one called Peter. This text shows Satan's slow and steady attack on Peter in the courtyard. He may have cast out demons in Jesus' name, but Satan will have his way with Peter. The problem is that Peter has gone alone to this temptation. He expected to rally Jesus into saving himself but misunderstood Jesus' mission. Jesus came prepared from hours in the garden while Peter slept. The simple truth is that **when we go alone, we will fall into temptation.**

What was I thinking of?

Most of us know how to pack for a vacation. We make lists of what we need to do for the travel arrangements, whether they are plane tickets or a tune-up for the car. We bring more clothes than we can wear to handle all kinds of weather. We know how to do that preparation. Yet, we leave the house most days unprepared for the temptations that we will face that day. We are not ready for our coworkers and clients who will test our patience and resolve to be honest. We are not prepared for the car that swerves in our way and causes us to swear. We are not ready for the short skirt that gets us to take a longer look than we should or the neighbor bragging about a new car they bought that makes us jealous.

Satan has so many ways to trip us up. He has so many tools in his arsenal. We get mad at ourselves afterward and wonder what we could have done. We sometimes ignore it, saying that it is just what is normal for humans. Sometimes, if it causes us major problems, we kick ourselves and wish we could be stronger. What was I thinking of when I fell to the temptation? What is there that any of us could have done? It is all just part of being human. Yet there is a way. Peter ignored it, and we shouldn't be that foolish. He gave into temptation because he didn't remember one basic rule: when we go alone, we will fall into temptation.

Three human answers to temptation

Ignore it; it will go away v.68⁶⁸*But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway.*

In the text, Peter shows us three common answers to temptations. None of them work. The first thing that he does is he tries to ignore it. The servant girl who had let Peter and John in was passing through the courtyard later. Her comment might have been accusing or simply innocent. You were with him, right? Peter brushes off the question, pretending he doesn't know or understand what she is talking about. Then he moves away from the light of the fire and goes into the shadows of the entryway. He will ignore the young girl and move away so no one takes her seriously.

We do something wrong, and we hope that no one notices. We mistakenly tell a coworker something that we now know is false. We should have done a task for one of the kids that we promised to get done yesterday. We swear at a car that cuts us off in traffic and attempt to forget about it. We might even try to bluff our way out of something when confronted. Such lies cause hurt and mistrust. They make us look unreliable or inept. It is just making a human excuse for something we know that we did wrong. Yet, it is hard to admit our errors, so we give in to the temptation and try to cover them up.

Deny it; make them think it isn't true v.69-70⁶⁹*When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." 70*⁷⁰*Again he denied it.*

As Peter moves away, the servant girl comments to the others that she is sure that Peter is one of Jesus' disciples. It would make sense; he came in with the other disciple. She saw him clearly in the light. He has to be one of them. Peter moving away more quickly, tells a lie and denies that he is a follower of Jesus. He doesn't want to be known as someone with Jesus. Perhaps Peter is afraid that the Pharisees will put him on trial. Perhaps, he is scared of the guards milling around the courtyard. He is hoping that a lie will save him.

A lie seems like a great way to get ourselves out of trouble. We have failed to keep a promise or do something we know was wrong. Instead of owning up to it, we lie about it when we are asked. We have to protect ourselves from unseen and sometimes unknown dangers. We tell someone the project was done and then finish it later. We give the impression that it was someone else's fault that the project was not done on time. In the end, we compound the failure and make things worse. The bluffing didn't work, so we notch it up a step and tell a bald-faced lie. Sometimes people see right through us. Occasionally, we get away with it for a moment. In the end, we destroy our reputation.

Get angry and chase it away v.71⁷¹*He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about."*

It probably got cold in the doorway. Peter drifted to the fire, thinking that the danger was over. After a moment, another person accused him of being with Jesus. His accent had given him away. Besides, John's gospel says that this person was in the Garden of Gethsemane and saw Peter. A lie didn't work, and so he got angry. He calls down curses and swears to them that he didn't know Jesus. As he walks away, the people around him start to back off from the madman. They know he was one of them, but it doesn't matter. They have Jesus, and that is enough.

You see it happen, and it probably has happened to you. Trapped in a corner, you get angry. It may be your way of dealing with someone pressing you and having caught you in a lie. It may be how you deal with what you think is unfair. Either way, you explode. You hope that people just back away like they do in the text. Sometimes it works. Yet, it works at what cost? Someone who is always using this tool is the person that everyone avoids and often the first one that gets fired from a job. It damages your reputation and can often make you feel so bad. If you are like most, you must apologize for how you blew up, or that relationship is gone.

Godly solutions to temptation

Repentance in failure v72 *Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice, you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.*

The rooster crows, and the lies all come down on Peter. Luke even tells us that Jesus turned and looked at Peter right after this third denial. It had to break his heart. He broke down and finally left the courtyard, weeping about how he had let down the savior he loved. Yet, he had a Godly solution to the problem. He left the place of temptation, and he repented. The most significant difference between Judas and Peter was that Peter repented, and Judas saw no chance for repentance and restoration. It spelled the end of one and the hope for another.

We are going to fail at times. There will be temptations that we fall for and times that we try to justify what we have done or escape the consequences. When it all falls in on us or just when we know that we have done wrong, the best thing we can do is repent. Throw yourself on the mercy of the cross. The healing process can start when we repent, and the cycle of sin and denial can stop. Jesus will lead us in our time of repentance to admit to others what we have done and to make amends. Jesus can renew our relationships and restore our lives.

Prayer for preparation 14:38 *Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."*

Is there a way to avoid at least some of our failings? There was one for Peter. Remember when Jesus encouraged the three disciples to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane? He was asking not only that they would pray for him but that they would pray for themselves because they would be tempted. One wonders what would have happened for Peter if he had prayed for hours as Jesus did in the garden. He might have been more able to withstand Satan's temptations. He might have been courageous enough to witness what Jesus had done for people instead of denying that he knew him.

We will continue to face temptation daily. While we cannot avoid every sin, we can cut down the number of times Satan has his way with us. We do that with word and prayer. We connect with the Lord and use his power in temptations instead of our own. Pray as you feel temptations as Jesus did, and ask the Father to give you strength and courage. We don't have to go through the pain of failure as often when we take time to prepare daily with Bible study and prayer. The big idea is that **we will succumb to temptation when we go alone. When we take Jesus, we let him battle our temptations.**

Christ brings the hope of restoration – John 21:15 *When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."*

Fortunately, the story doesn't end there. After the resurrection, Jesus meets with his disciples, and at that moment, he restores Peter. Peter has been forgiven, and he is again with the other disciples. He has seen the risen Lord and felt his love. Jesus takes it one more step. He restores Peter to the position of leadership and the position of disciple. It is the completion of the process of making Peter whole. He will serve the Lord and be his servant and disciple. He has his self-esteem and respect back. He knows the forgiveness is complete.

I want you always to remember that the Lord is on your side. When you fail, he will forgive you. If you ask, our Lord will do more; he will restore you and help you to serve again. Never be afraid to come to the Lord when you fail. He will always take you back. That is what the cross was all about. Also, never walk through this world of temptation alone. Temptation is nothing to be fooling around with. Peter thought he could handle it alone, and he got burned. When we go alone, we will fall to temptation; yet when we come to the Lord in prayer and Bible study, we take a friend at our side.

5. Pilate's court - Is He your king?

Mark 15:1-15

Big idea: You must choose between Jesus and the world. You can't have both.

Mark 15:1-15 Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

² "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. ³ The chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of." ⁵ But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. ⁶ Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. ⁷ A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. ⁸ The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. ⁹ "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, ¹⁰ knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him.

¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. ¹² "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. ¹³ "Crucify him!" they shouted.

¹⁴ "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

¹⁵ Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Christ is in your hands.

Pilate finds Christ thrust upon him v.1 *Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.*

Pilate ruled the Jews for ten years, showing contempt for the Jews and their religion throughout his reign. He was brutal with the people. Luke 13 mentions a time when Pilate slaughtered a group of Jews as they were making their sacrifices in the temple. Another time, he put flags with Caesar's image all over Jerusalem, which the Law of Moses forbade. Pilate spared those who protested his actions and took down the flags only when he could see that they would riot and cause him great pain. He was, after all, a practical man.

On Good Friday, we find the Jews waking him at dawn and bringing him an unusual prisoner. The practical Pilate must figure out what he will do with this Jesus, who seems to have upset all of the leaders of the Jewish people. The charge is that he is a king. Yet, what is he king of, and should Pilate care? His better judgment tells him that Jesus is innocent. The screaming world outside his door wants him to kill this innocent man. A choice has to be made. Being the practical man he was, Pilate soon realized that he could not save his career and this Jesus as well. He would yield to the popular pressure and sacrifice this Jesus. What would it matter? He soon figures out that you must choose between Jesus and the world. You can't have both.

The time is here: You will need to make a choice.

There used to be a day when it was easy to have Jesus and the world. That was the fifties when going to church was fashionable. No one worked on Sunday except the Police, Firemen, and those at the hospital. The rest of us could go to church at our leisure and rest the remainder of the day. Our culture sanitized television with no swearing and no nudity. Christian values were everywhere, and even those who didn't attend church accepted that the Ten Commandments were correct in their judgments of right and wrong.

It isn't that way anymore. Time has gotten precious, and people have pushed Jesus to the side. It is not uncommon to see a church where less than a third of the members are in church on any given Sunday. Jesus gets the leftovers of time and resources. It has become hard to see a movie or television show that meets the morals of the fifties. Truth has become whatever you want it to be rather than absolute for us

all. Our first inclination is to try, as Pilate does, to balance the cries of our world and the values of our faith. Yet, it doesn't work. They will be forever in conflict, meaning we must make a daily choice. You must choose between Jesus and the world. You can't have both.

Three games that Jesus will not play

Persuade me of your good v.5 *But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.*

Pilate wants a reason to be on Jesus' side. The first thing that he wants is for Jesus to persuade him. He may have heard how Jesus was adept at countering the arguments of the Pharisees throughout his ministry. They could not trap him or make him incriminate himself. Yet, Jesus would not cooperate with Pilate. He refused to give Pilate an excuse. Instead, Jesus' silence exposed the hatred of the priests. It showed them for what they were. Pilate had no trouble seeing right from wrong. He had only to do what he knew was right.

Sometimes Christians sit on the fence and want Jesus to persuade them to live their lives out for him. Persuade me, Jesus, that you have the power so that I should pray to you in my troubles. Persuade me, Jesus, that making time for you is the best thing instead of sleeping on Sundays. Yet, Jesus will not persuade us in that way. We must simply believe. He doesn't have to bargain with you for a greater share of your time as you try to juggle the world and your faith. He doesn't get on his knees and beg people to live out lives of faith. He offers and gives people the will to choose to follow him or to stumble through life as they try to find their way.

Make Jesus the lesser of two evils v.11 *But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.*

Having failed to get Jesus to defend himself, Pilate tries to make Jesus look good. He brings out a notorious criminal called Jesus Barabbas, who had murdered people in an uprising. The choice is simple – Jesus Barabbas, the murderer, ruled by hate, or Jesus Christ, the healer, ruled by love. Surely, the crowd will want Jesus Christ when he is compared to such a person as this. Yet, they don't. Instead, they chose to have Barabbas freed and Christ crucified, for they are children of hate as well. Then, stirred up by the chief priests who hate Jesus, they demand that the loving Jesus be put to death.

So many in our world will try to put a spin on Jesus and make him palatable to their lives. Christians discount the Bible's harsh words on sin, saying that their Jesus loves everyone no matter what they do. Sin is thus Ok because Jesus loves you. Even some Christians can't believe that Jesus would expect them to love their enemies or make time for him in their lives. So they fashion a Jesus who looks good and is presentable to the world. However, the time has come to choose between the loving Jesus as he is and the demands that he puts on our lives or the selfish Jesus created by the world. It is time to choose the authentic Jesus who has and still does love you. It is time to let him be your Lord and king.

Flog him to guilt them v.15 *Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.*

Pilate tried one last thing to get Jesus off the hook. He had him beaten within an inch of his life. He knew the crowd was angry at Jesus and wanted a pound of flesh. Maybe if he flogged him till he was torn and bleeding and stood before the gathering, they would say it was enough. Yet, the crowd did not buy it. They had no guilt or sympathy for Jesus. They wanted him dead and were not about to give in. Pilate could not play on their emotions and make them do what he wanted. He was a practical man, and everything had failed. Jesus would be sent to the cross.

People have always tried to guilt others into choosing Jesus. There were preachers from medieval times till today who preached the horrors of hell to get you to come to church and choose Jesus. Likewise, some parents tried to scare their children into doing the right thing. It sometimes works for a time but often doesn't work forever. Jesus doesn't want a sympathy vote or want you to be scared of him. He wants you to follow him because you love him and because you want to obey him. The crowd and Pilate should

have chosen Jesus Christ because of all the love he had shown by healing thousands of people. We must follow him not because we feel guilty but because we feel loved and wanted.

Making a choice by confession and life

Confess with your lips

Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent and that he should stand up for Jesus. He was the representative of Rome and had released many prisoners before who others had thought were guilty. We need to witness to our friends what our choice is so that the world can see the truth about Jesus. Our words have weight, especially when people see Jesus's impact on our lives. Don't put others down for their ignorance. Lift Jesus up and let the king shine forth in your life. Now I admit that you may not be able to change the minds of everyone any more than Pilate could have. Yet you still have to make a choice and not go along with the crowd. People may not always be willing to agree with you, but they can respect your choice.

But if that is to have any power, your life must show that Jesus is your king. You can't tell people how Jesus has impacted your life if they never see you in worship or see you serve the Lord. You can't tell people how Jesus is your Lord if you are not the most honest and kindest employee at your firm. You have to live your life as if he is your king. You need to bow before him in every aspect of your life. Be the best employee, a loving spouse, and a good friend or neighbor because Jesus is your Lord. Then, your words will have power when you confess Jesus as your Lord because your life shows he is your king.

The power of the choice

Could Jesus have forced Pilate to free him? Sure, how would the whole scene have changed with even two or three angels standing around Jesus that early morning? The angels would have cleared the place without even having to lift a finger. Yet, God gives us choices. He could force you to make him king. Something terrible happens to you every time you miss church or you could have a giant mark on your forehead when you lie or curse three times in one day. Yet, God has given you a choice. You can choose him as your king freely or not.

The reason is simple. God wants people who love him and want to be his children, not enslaved people forced into his kingdom. It is the same with a child. You could compel them to do the right things, but despite your nagging or constant punishment, they will sometimes rebel and do just the opposite. Love them, put simple boundaries that they understand around them, and show them by your example why such rules will give them a better life. God provides us with a choice and loves us enough that many of us have chosen to follow him. There is power in that choice because it is a choice we make, not one pushed on us. Yet you do have to make a choice. You must choose between Jesus and the world. You can't have both.

6. Golgotha – penalty paid

Mark 15:21-37

Big Idea: Identify with the cross in your hopeless moments and receive hope from Jesus.

Mark 15:21-37 A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.²² They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull).²³ Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.²⁴ And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.²⁵ It was the third hour when they crucified him.²⁶ The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.²⁷ They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left.²⁸ ²⁹ Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days,³⁰ come down from the cross and save yourself!"³¹ In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself!"³² Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.³³ At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.³⁴ And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*"--which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"³⁵ When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."³⁶ One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.³⁷ With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

What does the cross mean?

Every Roman citizen understood the hopelessness of the cross v. 24a, *And they crucified him.*

In writing to the Romans, Mark only had to say that they crucified Jesus. He did not have to explain the process of crucifixion or the pain that it caused anyone the Romans nailed to the cross. Every Roman citizen knew what it was. They had seen it with their own eyes. In our society, executions are done in closed rooms, so citizens don't have to witness the death penalty. The Romans had a different idea. They did it publically and frequently. Everyone in Jerusalem and Rome had seen hundreds of crucifixions in their lifetime.

The cross was the symbol of Roman power and justice. You committed a crime, and you paid the price of humiliation. You were stripped naked and hung out on a piece of wood exposed to the elements for a day or a week to slowly and painfully die. There was no hope or dignity for those crucified. The early Roman Christians knew the horror of the death that Jesus underwent for all of us. Because they knew what Jesus had gone through, they could identify with him and knew that he could identify with them in their pain. So they didn't flee the cross; they clung to it. And so it should be for us. I want all of us to identify with the cross in our hopeless moments and receive hope from Jesus.

What does the cross mean to you?

If the cross was well understood in Roman times, it is poorly understood in our times. Millions of people wear crosses as jewelry without thinking of what the cross means. Would they wear a medallion of a hangman's noose or electric chair so casually? Many have become numb to the real meaning of the cross. We see it everywhere in churches, and maybe that has numbed us to its significance. It is hung on walls in the front of churches, put on altars, and incorporated into our logos. All of that is good, but do we think about its meaning anymore?

Most Christians do get the idea that Jesus died for our sins. Yet, that tends to make us think that the cross is only about death and salvation. It is somehow only a death insurance policy. It has nothing to do with life now; it is just death insurance later. Yet, I would challenge that idea and say that the cross is for life as much as death. We all have dark days, and maybe some of you are experiencing more than your

fair share right now. Stand with me this morning at the cross and see that we are blessed because we have someone who understands. Identify with the cross in your hopeless moments and receive hope from Jesus.

Identify with Jesus in your hopeless moments.

Weakness – He was beaten till he was half dead v. 21 *A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.*

Jesus understands when you feel too weak to go on. Every condemned man was to carry the crossbeam through the streets to the place of execution. Jesus was too weak to carry his cross. They had beaten him till he was bloody and half dead as part of the trial. He could barely stumble to the cross. They had to grab a man off the street to carry his cross for him. He couldn't manage the weight of the cross by himself. He needed help. We forget how they abused him, tortured his poor body, and robbed him of his natural strength. We forget how fragile his body was that day.

We have days when we feel weak – a shell of the person we usually are. It may be that sickness has ravaged our bodies. It may be that life has overwhelmed us, and we are not sure where to turn. We may be just burned out from all the demands put on us. As you look at the cross, know that he understands. He sympathizes with our weakness because he has been there himself. He understands the feelings and the fears. If you want help when you are weak, go to the cross. There you will find one who understands and has the power to strengthen you and overcome the things that are bringing you down.

Humiliated – Jesus was mocked while he was down v. 29. *Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days*

He knows what it is to be kicked when you are down. It wasn't enough for the Jews and their leaders to bring him to Pilate to crucify him; they had to make fun of him on the cross. They mocked his promises of salvation and renewal. They mocked his miracles and made them look simple. Here are the religious leaders who should have been defending their savior, ridiculing Jesus for all the help that he had given to others. All his kind deeds of healing the sick and raising the dead were thrown back in his face because they did not understand or believe in what he had done.

Life can humiliate us as well. We feel bad when we help someone change their life and don't get even a simple word of kindness in return. We feel humiliated when we try to help someone, and they make fun of us instead. We want to quit, hide in our little shells, and resign from the world. As you look at the cross, know that he understands. Share your feelings with him. Let it all pour out in your prayers. See how he didn't give up. Come to the cross when you feel like the world is against you. He can show us how to respond with kindness in even the most demanding situations. He will give you kindness and help you to be kind even when attacked.

Abandoned – He died all alone v. 34 *And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"--which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

He knows what it feels like to be all alone. He spent six hours on the cross, surrounded by hecklers and by those who put him up on the cross. Only his mother and John ever show up at the cross, and he cannot help his mother in her pain. All the other disciples are gone. All the people who he healed are gone. Even God has abandoned him. He cries out the words from Psalm 22, speaking of how God has abandoned His Messiah. We know that it is part of our penalty for sin. But, even knowing that wouldn't make it any easier for Jesus as he is alone in the darkness and pain.

Most of us know what it is like to be alone. You can even be in a room of people and be alone. It is the feeling you get when you are waiting to see the doctor and don't know what to expect. So it can be when you have just argued with your spouse or a close friend. As you look at the cross, know that he understands. Cry out to him in prayer and know that he is there in the darkness of the night, and at the

times when you are feeling alone, and in pain, He will come and will help. He will wrap you in the comfort of his scriptures. He will send another Christian to listen and to console. He was alone, so we won't have to be.

The cross offers victory to those who will take up their cross and carry it v.21 *A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.*

Imagine the thoughts of the man named Simon – a Jew who had come for the Passover from North Africa. He has come into the city to worship, and suddenly his plans are interrupted as the Romans forced him to carry a criminal's cross. How he must have resented the pain and the inconvenience. Yet carrying Jesus' cross may have changed his life. The Roman Christians know him and his sons. Paul mentions a Rufus in Rome, probably the son of Simon as well as his mother, who was like a mother to Paul. Simon took up the cross of Jesus, which changed him and his whole family.

Sometimes, we are bothered when the Lord asks us to carry his cross. We don't want to take the time to help a neighbor or to share an invite for Easter. We get tired of serving in the church or volunteering at a local food bank. It is a bother and an interruption in our lives. Yet, when we are willing to bring the love and power of the cross into the lives of others, it changes us. You have not only been to the cross but also brought the love of the cross into the darkness of someone else's life. You know Simon's joy because you have responded to the words of Jesus - **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."**

When you are hopeless, come to the king v. 26. *The written notice of the charge against him read: the king of the Jews.*

The cross symbolized the power of the Roman government. It showed that Caesar was in charge and that he could deal with the darkness of murder, theft, and a host of other evils against the state and the people. Jesus' cross shows the power of our God. That is why it has become the symbol of the church. It offers forgiveness because Jesus died for us and our sins. It, however, shows that Jesus has conquered the darkness that we often face in our lives.

No other religion in the world has a God who understands our pain and suffering. No other religion has the answer for weakness, humiliation, and loneliness. Jesus has experienced all of those and conquered them. He has been on the cross, and he says I understand, and I will help. So when you find yourself dealing with the darkness of the world, there is only one place to go. Spend some time here at the cross. Let it sink in what Jesus has done and is still doing in your life. Then take the cross with you as a life force for you and others. We all need to identify with the cross in our hopeless moments and receive hope from Jesus for us and others. Amen.

7. Empty Tomb - Turning Dark Saturdays into glorious Sundays

Mark 16:1-8

Big idea: When days are dark, look to Jesus for a glorious Sunday

Mark 16:1-8 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Dark Days

The saddest day in the Bible v.1a *When the Sabbath was over*

The Saturday before Easter must have been the darkest day the disciples ever experienced. They had experienced the joy of following Jesus around the Holy Land for three years. They had seen him heal and cast out demons. They had seen him walk across the water and feed thousands at a time. And oh, the messages! It was like God himself was speaking to them. He helped them understand the message of the Old Testament that no one else understood. He helped them draw comfort and feel the love of God in a way that was missing from the messages of the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

Now he was gone. He was taken from them in an instant when they were not ready and not prepared. All their dreams and hopes were shattered. The future, which was so bright, was gone – stolen from them. The disciples were filled with guilt at not being able to help him and shame that one of them betrayed him. Why bother going on? There was no future and no hope. Yet, in their moping, they had forgotten the Jesus they professed to know. They had forgotten the things he had taught them. They had forgotten to trust him. Things could have been different that day if they had remembered one thing: When days are dark, look to Jesus for a glorious Sunday.

Sad days abound in our world today.

People are surrounded by sad days in our world. We are glum people with so many unemployed or underemployed and so many afraid of losing their homes. I hear it on the streets and from many of you after church. It wasn't long ago that we were the envy of the world. Everyone wanted to be like America with our homes and conveniences. So they flocked here to have our freedoms, opportunities, and jeans.

Then the bottom fell out, and the government could do little but spend money we don't have. Some are asking why to go on. The future is filled with more questions than answers. Tomorrow seems less bright than it did a few years ago. The answer is out there, but only some are finding it. In our moping, we have forgotten the Jesus that used to be part of so many people's lives. Things can be different if people would listen and would trust. The answer for dark days is not in a confused and fighting Washington. It is in the Savior of Easter who is the light in dark days and the solution to our problems. When days are dark, look to Jesus for a glorious Sunday.

Worry turns to surprise.

Filled with worry and unanswered questions v.2-3 *Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"*

Because they had forgotten what Jesus had said, the women came to the tomb filled with worry and unanswered questions. They came to honor him one last time by finishing the embalming process. They would do this last thing for Jesus before they tried to go back to their lives and make the best of it. Yet, they were unsure if they could finish the work. There was a big stone over the mouth of the tomb. It was too big for them to manage. Problems were piling on problems. Questions were going unanswered, and they hoped for the best.

On dark days, a lot of people will try to do the best that they can. They work at jobs they don't like but feel lucky to have a job. They will pay a mortgage on a house whose price has tumbled. They will pay off their credit cards and buy as little as possible to make ends meet. Many of these are good people, even Christians who are just trying to get through life. They have desires and need to remember where to turn for help. They may even come to church today because they know you are supposed to go on Easter. Yet, the mind isn't fully here. They, like the women, are still thinking about all questions and problems piling up in life.

God was working, and we didn't expect it v.4-5 *But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.*

Imagine the women's surprise when they reached the tomb and found the stone rolled away. They were in for a real shock when they grew curious and looked inside the tomb. Jesus wasn't there, but an angel was sitting in the grave with a message. They had forgotten where to turn for help, but God was still working on their behalf. God answered the question the women had asked. The stone was rolled away. Yet, it was moved away not to make their task easier but to show them what God had done. They may have forgotten God, but He didn't forget them.

God will surprise people. He works for them even when they don't think to turn to him for help. Our Lord is healing their sicknesses, helping them find jobs and manage their finances. He is giving them support to raise their kids and help with all the questions of life. Sometimes we see that after the fact, and sometimes we ignore him even then. We consider ourselves lucky that we got well or found that new job. But luck alone doesn't bring us hope. Luck is fickle and can be good or bad. Only when we start depending on God to help can we get past the dark days. We have true hope and joy only when we expect him to be at the tomb or any other place where we have problems and questions.

The steps from hopelessness to hope

Listen – God keeps his promises v.6 *"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.*

The simple truth is that those who listen to Jesus have hope. The angel is there to remind them what Jesus has already told them. Jesus told his disciples several times that he would rise from the dead. He was even specific about the fact that he would rise three days after his death. If they had listened to him, Saturday could have been different. They could have spent all Saturday waiting for Jesus to come to life. The day would have been one of expectation, not sorrow. The worry and doubt could have been replaced with hope and expectation.

God keeps his promises. The problem is that most people need to listen. Few people come to church to hear what the Lord says to us. Fewer still read the Bible regularly. As a result, we don't know what the Lord has promised and what he will do for us in our dark days. Hope begins by knowing what the Lord has promised and holding onto those promises. Times of darkness can be changed from times of hopelessness to times of expectation. Listening to the Lord makes us better able to be ready when the opportunities he is bringing us come our way. We can jump on them and make the most of them instead of questioning whether this is true or is really for us. The first step to gaining real hope is listening to the Lord.

Obey – We need to go where God sends us v.7 *But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'*

The women who heard the message are given a task. They are to go and tell the disciples. When you have heard what Jesus says, you are to obey. Only if the disciples go to Galilee will they have the entire future that the Lord has in mind for them. Yes, they will see Jesus for themselves later on Easter; but it will be in Galilee that they will get complete instructions about what the future will hold for them. They will not have Jesus' mission for them by just standing around and waiting for it to come. God has a direction, and they need to obey.

The truth is still the same. You must obey what our Lord says when you have listened to Jesus. God calls you to participate in your own future. He has a plan laid out, and that is the plan that will bring success. If you want the glorious Sunday, you can't just sit back and wait for it to drop in your lap. So many wonder why hope doesn't come to them. They hear the message the Lord has given, and they are standing there bargaining with God or challenging the path. It is too hard. God expects too much. He can't expect me to attend church, lead a holy life, and even help others. Those who try to bargain with God will have less hope and joy. It is like settling for second best when the best is laid before you. The path to hope begins with listening but must continue with following. God knows how to get you there; if you want genuine joy, you will follow.

Believe and draw closer to Jesus so you can have hope.

Ironically, the book of Mark ends there. The women believe in Jesus while having not yet seen him. Someone else added verses after this, but Mark stopped with the faith of the women. That could be because it is all about believing. Believing is the key to going from hopelessness to hope. Take the first step. For some of you, that means going to church regularly so that you can listen and learn more about Jesus and his promises. It may mean that you need to be in Bible class or talk to your pastor about starting a small group so you can make those promises your very own.

Others may need to work on the second step. They know what Jesus says but struggle to find time to follow him. You are still bargaining with Jesus because you think what he asks is hard. But, I am sorry, you have to obey. There is no other way to find real hope. Finally, a few of us must believe He can change our lives. When days are dark, look to Jesus for a glorious Sunday. God is in the business of turning dark Saturdays into glorious Sundays. Scripture is full of his promises of help and love. Easter is the time to see that firsthand. So listen, obey, and trust in Him. God will not let those who believe down.

Easter Season: Paul's Conversion to First Missionary Journey

This is the story of Paul's conversion and his early ministry including what has been called his "first missionary journey." It is the story of God's calling and development of Saul the persecutor into Paul the missionary. The bible wants us to know how God called Paul and used the church to support him on this journey. The first missionary journey headed to the areas of Cyprus and Asia Minor which were home to Paul and Barnabas. Throughout these first steps, the Holy Spirit is central to the mission. He will shape Paul and determine the direction of the early church. He will also lead Paul and teach him what his mission is all about.

Easter Season

1. Paul's Conversion

Acts 9:1-19

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

Acts 9:1-19 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered.¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here--has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

Relationship: the heart of faith.

What sets Christianity apart from other faiths is that it is about relationships, not religion. Religions have rules and doctrines that people must keep because either the great one in the sky or the universe has decreed how it should be. Christianity is different. Christianity is based on a relationship with a loving God who builds relationships between us and others. It is why programs and doctrines will not bring people to faith. Relationships, like some churches are using to develop outreach and evangelism programs, bring people to Christ.

If there is a difference between Saul, the persecutor of the church, and Paul, the great missionary, it is found in contrast between religion and relationship. Saul the Jew was about keeping the theology pure and the rules that he saw in the Old Testament obeyed. Paul is about a relationship with the risen Christ that changes everything in our life with God and others. If you want proof that the church needs to focus more

on relationships, see how a relationship with Christ changed Saul into one of the greatest Christians who ever lived.

What a relationship with God can do

A. Cocky and Dangerous v. 1 *Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.*

Saul was an angry animal whose very breath was dangerous. Like many other rabbis, he believed that people must obey the law and that these new Christians were perverting the Torah and keeping God from working on the earth. He was an angry man convinced of his righteousness and the sin of others. For such a breach, the Jews must put hypocrites to death. He stood at Stephen's stoning, holding the executioners' coats. Some say that he was in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' trial and saw Jesus on the cross. He probably approved of the crucifixion because he wanted others to keep the Jewish religion as he did.

Such people exist in the church today. They are the people we feel uncomfortable around. They believe the church should be pure and discard the less-than-perfect. They think Holy Communion should be kept pure, and we should stay away from other Christians who are not as good as us. The church, for them, is rigid and stuffy. It is a church of the mind and not the heart. God loves only those who keep His commandments. The imperfect should not apply. Saul the Jew is not someone I would like to have known. He had a God of fear and not one of love.

B. Questioned and convicted v. 4-5 *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.*

Suddenly Saul was on trial. What started as a trip to purge the church ground to a halt on the road to Damascus. In a moment, God's light shone on Saul's heart and revealed the blackness there. Saul discovered he was a lost sinner in danger of God's judgment. He heard the voice of Jesus call out to him. He understood that he did not know God or have a relationship with him. His self-righteousness meant nothing. Saul must have been reeling on the ground when he realized that the Jesus he was persecuting was the God he thought he knew.

Often, it is a crisis that turns our world upside down and shatters all those little pet beliefs that we often have. Somehow we thought that God would protect us and that Christians never suffer. Somehow we believed our faith was strong enough, and then we fell into a public sin. If we have to ask, "who is God?" or "why is this happening to me?", then we don't know God as well as we think we do. Often, our troubles come because we have put our faith in religion and not taken the time in daily bible study or prayer to know God. A vibrant relationship with God and not correct beliefs or rules get us through the crisis.

C. Broken and turned upside down v.8 *Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.*

Paul sat in the city for three days sorting out what had happened. He had seen God in the Shekinah light as Moses had in the days of the Exodus. Paul had seen God, and Jesus had called out to him. He fasted and prayed, wondering how that could be. Why had he been saved and not destroyed? He was blind, but he began to see. God made a covenant with his people based on love and not on the law. God made them his people and loved them as no earthly god had ever done. He was a God of relationships and mercy to Saul and others.

When we are broken, we often come to see God as He is. The rules are gone. All that exists is His mercy at the bedside of a loved one or in the shattered fragments of a broken life. We throw ourselves on His grace, for we don't feel we have any way to bargain with Him. God reaches out in our prayers and His word, and for the first time, we feel like He has touched us. We have felt His heart, which is not bound up by rules. It is bound up in the cross. Here is the one who gave His son so he might have a relationship with us. Call me Father, he says to us.

D. Chosen and empowered v. 15 *"Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.*

The first thing Ananias said to Saul was, "brother." God had chosen Saul to be his own and had given him an extraordinary task. The Hebrew of the Hebrew Pharisee would become an apostle to the Gentiles who had not been good enough for the Jewish church. He would bring others to Jesus as Jesus had brought him to faith. God could have punished him for the many Christians he had brought to their death, but God chose to let Saul know him personally and see him in a way few others had so that Paul the missionary could bring kings, cities, and nations into a relationship with God.

God chose each of you for a particular task in the church. You have been given gifts different from others around you and called to a unique path of service. It is often called the snowflake principle, for just as no two snowflakes are alike, no two Christians have the same gifts or paths. The one thing that all have is that the calling is based on their relationship with God. The stronger your relationship, the more you will be able to do. Power in the church is not based on your holiness. It is based on your closeness to God and your willingness to obey.

Relationship, not religion v.18 *Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,*

Saul was changed because he traded religion for a relationship. It was like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see and know God in a new way. The Jewish Saul was a child of the law raised in the church and committed to that way of life. The Christian Paul was in a relationship with Jesus Christ. It made all the difference for him. In the old way, it was about keeping the rules and ensuring that others did too. The transformed Paul knew Jesus Christ and was willing to live for this one who had become his friend, leader, and God.

Too many Christians today are like the early Saul. They belong to a church, and they identify with the church's culture and think they must be holy to be accepted by God. The truth is that God is willing to receive you like you are and transform you as you get to know him intimately. Paul would spend fourteen years before the first missionary journey. He would speak about what Jesus had done for him from the beginning, but he became the Paul we know after he built that relationship. If you want to have God's power, get to know Jesus intensely. It will change you just as it did for Paul.

What if Ananias hadn't gone? V.13 *"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.*

There is a question that begs an answer. Who is Ananias, and what would have happened if he hadn't gone to see Paul? We know nothing of him other than what is in this text. He was a lesser-known believer that God used to accomplish a prominent part in God's plan. God chose him because he would go. The same could be said of men like John Staupitz or Mordecai Ham. You probably never heard of them, but God used them to lead Martin Luther and Billy Graham to ministry. Their relationship with the Lord was crucial to take people like Luther from religion to relationship.

If you are willing to build a relationship with God and have a relationship with others, God can do great things with you no matter how small you feel. He can give you a ministry to be the next Luther or to mentor the next Luther and bring them closer to Christ. It is all about relationships. Paul never forgot that lesson. In all of his books, a close relationship with Christ is what he wanted for the church. It is the way God brought him to the Christian faith, and it is the way that you will bring others to know Jesus and not just to be religious.

2. Saul in Damascus

Acts 9:19-31

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

Acts 9:19-31 and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. ²³ After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. ²⁵ But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. ²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. ³⁰ When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. ³¹ Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

I will gladly tell you about my family if you have an hour or so.

I could talk about them for hours on end. My wife, children, sons-in-law, and grandchild mean the world to me and are a source of delight. I am genuinely blessed, for God has given me people who bring great joy to my life. I could tell you stories about each of them as I burst with joy. But it is not just me. I have seen others talk about their family, their job, or some hobby that way. It is whatever has the fire in their heart and makes them happy to be alive. It may be a sense of accomplishment or something that brings joy to their lives as they are with them or do the task.

I have even known a few who have that fire when talking about Jesus. One minute they are calm, then the next minute, they are very animated and talking about their relationship with Jesus or sharing something they have learned in Bible study and prayer. Paul was like that from the very beginning. His faith is just days old, and the gospel lit a fire in him. He has to tell his story. He has to witness about the Jesus who he met on the road. It is the beginning of a vibrant life that we see in Acts and a heart we touch in every one of his epistles.

He immediately began to speak about Jesus.

A. He could not hold in the news about Jesus v.20 *At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.*

There are times you can't hold it in. In less than a week, Saul has gone from being one who was ready to destroy the followers of Jesus to one preaching about Jesus in the synagogues. It was a change that amazed everyone who saw it. The persecutor has become the missionary. What had happened is summed up in the fact that Saul now knows that Jesus is the Son of God. In the Shekinah light on the road to Damascus, Paul saw that Jesus is God and the long-awaited Messiah. It lit a fire in his soul because the Old Testament came to a point in Jesus and showed God's love.

The people who seem to have that same spirit in the church are often those who have just come to faith. They know what it is to be without God's love and salvation. They felt that rush of mercy and grace in the darkness and hopelessness of sin and life without God. God has shown His love in their life, and they must tell people their stories. They must tell what the cross means to them and how their lives have

changed. Saul was a new convert who never forgot what it was like to have God's light and love come to him when he was an enemy of God.

B. The message struck fear in Jewish hearts v. 21 *All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name?"*

The new Saul struck fear into the hearts of the Jewish community. Saul was to be the Jewish community's savior. He was to come with letters from the High priest to destroy the growing Christian community. Now Saul had turned against them. He proclaimed Jesus with such power that they could not defeat his arguments. What was more powerful than anything else was his transformed life. He must be gotten rid of, so they set out to kill him. His witness was winning the hearts of many and must be stopped. Suddenly the man who was to cleanse the city of Christians had Christians smuggling him out in a basket like a criminal.

One of the great struggles for the new Christian is to go back and talk to their old friends. The drinking buddies are uncomfortable because you don't swear and will limit yourself to two drinks. You have changed. You have shown them that they need to change by the new and better you. You don't have to lecture them about Jesus. They see it in you as soon as you walk in the door. And if you talk about how Jesus has changed your life for the better, they don't like you even more. Christ has that effect on us. He gives us lives that look different. Imagine how Saul looked to the Jews.

He took up his mission to Jerusalem.

C. Was this witness for real? v.26 *When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.*

After three years in Arabia studying the Old Testament, Saul comes to Jerusalem to meet Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. They still are not sure about this former persecutor of the church. Was the new Saul a trick to gain their confidence? They kept their distance and were afraid of him. Fortunately, Barnabas intervenes. He has seen the new Saul and tells his story. Barnabas tells of his powerful witness and the desire of the Jews to kill Saul. In the end, Barnabas is a bridge for Saul into the community as he convinces the leaders to trust Saul and allow Saul into the fellowship.

New Christians need a Barnabas, especially if they have less than perfect reputations. They need someone who will encourage them, accept them, and introduce them to others. It is hard for us to trust the imperfect, but God also wants them to be part of His fellowship. We help them grow as followers of Jesus and future church leaders by guiding them when they are young in the faith. We need to keep putting aside our fears, give the new person practical help, and guide them through those troublesome first days of faith when they are scared and uncomfortable.

D. His witness frightened old friends v. 29 *He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him.*

The fellowship of the Christians gave Saul the confidence to talk to his old friends in Jerusalem. Having stood at their feet as this group stoned Stephen to death, Paul needed to share with them the message that Jesus was God and Lord. The Jews did not receive Paul well. Saul was a turncoat in their eyes and worthy of the same treatment they gave Stephen. Ironically, it never occurred to Saul that they would not be open to his message. The Jerusalem Christians got him on a boat headed for his hometown of Tarsus up in Asia Minor.

In Acts 22, Paul tells us that God told him to leave Jerusalem. His ministry would not be with the Jews but with the gentiles who would listen to him. The old friends were angry that he had left their ranks, so God called him to help others. Thus, would come more study and preaching in the Gentile world before the first missionary journey. In our society as well, there are times that people don't want to hear the witness about Jesus. It upsets their preconceived ideas. They don't want to hear that they need a savior

or that God provided one. Sometimes, God wants us to be open to who will listen and who will not so we win the most.

Excited about his calling, Saul could not be silenced.

Saul was bold, and he tended to stir up controversy. He also never stops talking about Jesus to people around him. In second Corinthians, Paul talks about the three Roman and five Jewish beatings he received. He also was on three shipwrecks while witnessing. The book of Acts only mentions some of them. Maybe that is why God chose him. Paul wouldn't shut up. He told the gospel across Turkey, Greece, Italy, and Spain. He witnessed while in jail and wrote letters when he could not visit people. The message that Jesus was God's Son and had risen from the dead was always on his lips.

The message was very effective. Paul kept converting people to faith because of his constant witness and because his very life showed this message's importance. He gladly suffered for the gospel because God reclaimed him, and Paul wanted others to have the same grace. It wasn't Saul's knowledge of scripture or his Roman heritage that gave power to his witness, although those things did help his ministry. No, it was his excitement and perseverance. He had a message that just had to be told. Jesus had redeemed him, and he could not keep silent about what God had done.

When was the last time you were so excited about Jesus?

I felt guilty as I read this text. When was the last time I was as excited about Jesus as Saul was throughout the text? Sadly, not everyone is excited about the gospel message. I don't get excited about motorcycles or woodworking as pleasant as they are. Saul was excited because God had given him life instead of destroying him. God had created a personal relationship with him, and Saul wanted everyone to have that relationship. It was worth more to him than life itself.

What would our world be like if we got that excited to know Jesus? What would it be like if we talked about Jesus as much as we talked about our family, hobbies, or baseball? Excitement grows and can be caught. The world would change and be gentler and kinder if we shared Jesus. It would be a place where people got along and were willing to help one another. I need to pray about getting more excited about Jesus. I want others to have my joy and the blessings He has brought to my life.

3. The strategy of the Spirit

Acts 13:1-13

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

Acts 13:1-13 In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. ⁴ The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. ⁶ They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, ⁷ who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. ⁹ Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ¹⁰ "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? ¹¹ Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. ¹² When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. ¹³ From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.

What is next?

The church that once was centered in Jerusalem has fanned out into Syria and beyond. Persecution in Jerusalem and the faith of hearts on fire for God have spread the gospel to new lands. First, Antioch and later Rome became the center of the church as the church moved out to the Gentiles. And so we find these five men praying about what is next. They are men from Cyprus, Africa, and modern Turkey. They fast and pray because they want to share the message of salvation but are still determining how. Lord, show us what we are to do is their plea.

What is next? It is the question that many churches struggle with and that many churches have given up on the question. Our world is changing just as theirs did. We see people struggling with busy lives and fractured families. We see people struggling with their work and often their health. We wonder what to do. This gathering is a turning point for the church and can lead us to a turning point today. It begins with a people in prayer whose hearts are burning for the lost. Then, it shows a God who opens those hearts and moves them forward with his power as He plants the seeds of what they are to do in their hearts.

Called by the Holy Spirit

Called while using their gifts v.1 *In the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers.*

Look closely at the group God has assembled. We have met some of them before. Barnabas and Paul, you know. Simeon is thought by some to be the Simon who carried Jesus' cross on Good Friday. Manaen is the adopted brother of King Herod. Notice how they are busy serving and using their gifts. The call of God comes not while they are sitting waiting for something to happen but rather while they are busy teaching and preaching. They have active ministries to the people of Syria as they build the church. "What is next" will be an extension of what they are already doing.

You will not find your call if you sit in a cave and wait for it. Those whom God calls are the ones who are busy using their gifts already. Their time of service is training that God uses to prepare them for future ministry. This "on-the-job" training develops their talents and lives by faith. God calls the busy for further service. He takes people who have shown that they are faithful to simple things and calls them to greater

things. Our Lord takes those willing to walk by faith into the land of miracles. He prepares them for greater things by using the service they are doing now.

Called while seeking God's will v.2 *While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*

He calls them while they are fasting. These are not men on a diet but men whose hearts are burning for the church. They have briefly set aside food to focus on prayer about what the Lord wants. They see the lost and feel like the church needs to move in new directions, but they are unsure where or how. It is their submission to the will of the Lord that will allow them to do miracles. They do not ask God to bless their plans but humble themselves as they seek His direction. They are convinced that God alone knows where the church must go.

Oh, that the church today would pray with that vigor because their hearts are burning to know what the Lord's will is for their lives. Let us not wring our hands because times are uncertain but fold them in prayer, submitting ourselves to make the sacrifices it may take for his will to come. It often starts with just a few. The Bible mentions five in prayer. Imagine what could happen if five gathered today in prayer with hearts burning with a desire for the lost. The angels in heaven would celebrate, and God would move mountains to help them to accomplish the plan He had for them.

Called and supported by the whole church v.3 *So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.*

The five will not change the world by themselves. Here the whole church gets behind Barnabas and Saul. They lay their hands on them to support the ministry they are about to go on. They prayed for them and backed them financially so that they could focus on ministry. Those in ministry should serve with others. Throughout Paul's ministry, churches in Antioch, Philippi, and Ephesus would support and pray for him. He went as their representative into the world as well as God's representative. Paul's letters make it clear that God had given them partners.

We all need to get behind leaders God is speaking to through prayer. I can tell you from experience that the ministry is sometimes lonelier than the Maytag repairman. Pray for your leaders. Give them words of encouragement. No one should do ministry alone. Please do the same for missionaries and district presidents as they serve in difficult places. It may be time to find ways to financially support their ministry and lift them personally as they face the struggles that God's servants face. No one will go far if they are alone.

The path was made obvious.

Go to those you know v.4 *The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.*

With the entire world before them, there never seemed to be any doubt in the minds of Barnabas and Saul where they would begin this ministry to the world. They went home. This first missionary journey is a trip to Cyprus, the home of Barnabas, and then to Asia Minor, where Paul grew up. It was natural to want to share the gospel with the people dear to them. Their people needed the message, and God blessed their ministry to people in the areas where they grew up. They would use the natural contacts of family and friends. They reached people they understood and loved.

We often think of missions as going out to Africa and Asia, and they can be. Yet, when our heart is burning for the salvation of others, often those others are near our home. They are relatives and people in our community who we want so much to have this salvation we do. They are people we meet when we work on our lawn or in a group where we belong. You understand the community that they live in and face the same struggles that they do. Those common bonds present opportunities and make it natural for you to share God's love. Know that God will be with you.

Go in the power of the Spirit v.11 *Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun."*

Never go anywhere without the Holy Spirit. Barnabas and Saul didn't know all the details about what this ministry would be like; they just trusted the Lord to take care of things as they went along. Every day was a new adventure. Every day, God, through prayer, would give them direction for the day. And when they came upon sorcerers and mobs who threatened their whole ministry, Paul called upon God to move the power of Satan out of their way. The Lord responded with such strength that a proconsul came to faith on Cyprus, and God planted churches across Asia Minor.

Sometimes, we expect God will give us all the details before we begin a ministry. God is wiser than that because he wants us to trust Him through the challenges ahead. He wants us to ask Him the next step in prayer daily so that we lean on Him and his power in ministry. We can't overcome Satan and his problems with our might. We need to trust God and let Him deal with challenges as we bring them to Him in prayer. He wants our ministry to succeed since it is His ministry. Lean on the power of the Holy Spirit, and nothing is impossible.

Let us pray for God's call and power.

You can't beat God's strategy. First, he calls those who are already using their gifts to serve Him and willing to seek His will and not demand that God do ours. Next, he calls people to go into ministry with the support of the whole church's prayers and finances. What's next? It would be best if you got into ministry. Find a place where the Lord can use you and let him prepare and build you using the skills He has given you. If you can teach, then teach. If you want to reach the community, do that. Let God prepare you by serving in a way true to yourself.

Then pray, don't plan. Pray to the Lord about His desire for you. Let the Lord burn into your heart a passion for the lost, a desire for our children, or a desire for ministering to those who are hurting. Pray, pray, pray, and as you are in contact with the Lord, he will give you the direction for service. Finally, go and do ministry asking for the support of others and trusting the power of the Lord. You cannot work out all the difficulties or expect to know the whole plan. Go forward, bringing daily needs to the Lord in prayer and counting on the power of the word to work miracles. God is the only one who knows the strategy of how to reach a city, a county, or a nation. Serve the Lord by using His gifts; He will prepare the ministry for you. The Lord will open your heart to serve in a place that excites you. He will empower you to do that ministry and even do miracles in His name. Amen.

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

Acts 13:13-45 From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.¹⁴ From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down.¹⁵ After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak."¹⁶ Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me!¹⁷ The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country,¹⁸ he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert,¹⁹ he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance.²⁰ All this took about 450 years. "After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet.²¹ Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years.²² After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'²³ "From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised.²⁴ Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel.²⁵ As John was completing his work, he said: 'Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but he is coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'²⁶ "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.²⁷ The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath.²⁸ Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed.²⁹ When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.³⁰ But God raised him from the dead,³¹ and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.³² "We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers³³ he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: "'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'.³⁴ The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: "'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.'³⁵ So it is stated elsewhere: "'You will not let your Holy One see decay.'³⁶ "For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed.³⁷ But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.³⁸ "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.³⁹ Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.⁴⁰ Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:⁴¹ "'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'" ⁴² As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath.⁴³ When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.⁴⁴ On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.⁴⁵ When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.

What do you say when someone asks you to speak? V.15 *The synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak."*

"John, I know you go to church. I have struggled lately because my mother has been in the hospital." If there were ever words that stop you dead in your tracks and cause your heart to skip a beat, those words rank right up there. Someone invites you to talk about your faith. What do you say? It would be easy to tell them that you are too busy to speak now. You might also wish the pastor or a church elder was

standing next to you to field all the questions. Yet, you are on deck, and the Lord has called you to speak on his behalf and help this person who needs His mercy in life.

Saul and Barnabas are given such an opportunity. It was customary for visiting teachers to come and speak at the synagogue. They could have soft-pedaled the gospel because they knew that not everyone in attendance would be happy with what they had to say. Instead, they spoke about Jesus. Paul spoke simply about what God had done, and so must you. As we look at the words of Paul, we see a valuable lesson in what to say when someone asks us about our church and our faith when they are hurting or in pain. Like Paul, remember, it is all about Jesus. He alone can help the broken heart.

It is all about Jesus

A. In Jesus, God kept His promise v.23 *"From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised.*

Because he speaks to Jews and Gentile converts, Paul starts with Old Testament History. He began with Abraham and God's promise to all the Jews, given over 2000 years ago. Then, he progressed through Moses, Samuel, and David to show that God never wavered from that promise. Finally, Paul demonstrated that God kept all those promises in Jesus. He is the Messiah they have been waiting for, and He came even though their lives have not been perfect. God is a God who we can trust. He said He would send a savior, and He kept that promise.

People still need to know that God keeps his promises. As you talk to a neighbor, you can share how God helped someone you know in the hospital. You can share how the Lord helped you through a challenge in your life and answered your prayers. So many people and things in life don't deliver on the promises that they make. People become skeptical and doubt everything around them in life. They need to know that there is a God on whom they can depend. They need to know that Jesus is the answer to their worst fears and pains. God is faithful. He wants to help.

B. Man can't stop God's grace v.27 *The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him, they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath.*

Saul reminds them that not everyone will accept the grace of God. The leaders in Jerusalem, who should have known the Messiah because they studied the Old Testament, didn't recognize Him. Instead of welcoming Him, they crucified Him. It seemed that the plan of salvation failed. Yet, mankind can't stop God. God, through the cross, was able to work the miracle of salvation. These men could put themselves out of grace but not stop grace from coming to others. God can work His miracles through every situation and over any barriers that men or Satan might erect.

Sometimes, people in pain think that the situation is too bad for God to help. They need to see that God is greater than their problems. Others may try to interfere, but God is bigger. Problems may seem too big to handle, but God is bigger. The only thing that can stop God's care for us is us. Is our heart open to allow God to work in our lives? Will we trust Him and let Him help us through our struggles? Will we follow Him, believing that God can help us, or will we turn away like the Jewish leaders because Jesus didn't do what we expected? God can do anything if we let Him.

C. Jesus shows God's power and love for us v.30. *But God raised him from the dead,*

Then Saul comes to the punchline. The resurrection is the most crucial part of the story. God did the impossible and raised Jesus from the dead. The Messiah they have been waiting for has come in their lifetime. God kept his promise, and He did so through Jesus. Paul quotes three Old Testament passages to show that this was always God's intent. To prove this is true, Paul shares that many had seen the risen Lord for themselves. Therefore, the resurrection is true, and it is the demonstration of God's power and His love for us.

People need to hear that God can do anything for them when they are hurting. If our Lord was able to raise Jesus from the dead, there is nothing that He cannot do for them. So likewise, if our Lord loved us

enough to sacrifice his son, there is nothing we need that He will not do for us. Over the centuries, this one act of Jesus has changed millions' lives. The cross and resurrection are at the heart of all that we believe. It demonstrates God's mercy and shows that God will always care for us.

D. Jesus is the key to new life v.38 *"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.*

Through Christ, they could have forgiveness of sins and a new life in Jesus. Were they willing to accept this gift from God, or would they turn away from it as the Jews had in Jerusalem? God had declared them righteous by the cross and offered them a deep relationship with Him. No one is too wicked or broken for God to forgive. You have to believe that God loves you and that this offer of salvation and life with Him is genuine. There are no catches to the cross. There are no reservations about the resurrection. Jesus is the key to a new life free of guilt and filled with His power.

Suppose you have shared Jesus with someone in pain. It is now up to them to decide if they will accept God's offer. Many will want help without really wanting Jesus. Like the crowds that followed Jesus, they want a miracle but don't want a savior. It doesn't work like that. Jesus is the key to new life and to help at this moment. He has the path through every trouble man faces, but people must be willing to trust Him and follow Him. They must let Him overcome the sins they commit and the problems they face. You can't do it without Jesus.

Keep your witness focused.

The temptation will be to let yourself get distracted. We want to have people focus on their blessings and tell the grieving that life will be better. We want to cheer them up amid their pain and suffering. God wants us to tell them about Jesus. Others who don't know Jesus can tell them all the pet phrases, which often don't help. God calls us to share about the one who has shown His love for them on the cross and in the empty tomb. We need to help them see how Jesus has helped us through life so they will see Him as their answer.

Not everyone will accept what you have to say, and that is Okay. People only sometimes accept good advice from the doctor, their parents, or other specialists. But, as a Christian, you know where you go for help and offer Jesus in the kindest and most loving way possible. Acceptance is up to them. You know that Jesus can and will help if they let Him. You have felt His great mercy and love for even those who don't know Him. You know of his power to heal and help people in need. It is your greatest gift, so you give it in love. Nothing is a better gift.

Your witness about Jesus is powerful v. 44 *On the next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.*

Saul and Barnabas will be ejected from town before the story is over, but only after the word of the Lord spreads throughout the whole region. The witness about Jesus is powerful. Who else has shown love so great as Jesus did on the cross? Who else can work miracles like the resurrection in our lives? The Holy Spirit powerfully worked when Paul spoke. The whole city gathered to hear the message of salvation that Paul was sharing. Paul had used the opportunity to witness. He talked about Jesus, and the message changed lives. God had worked a miracle.

Trust the Lord to do the same when you speak. It doesn't have to be polished with a detailed outline. Just talk about Jesus from your heart and let the Holy Spirit do the rest. People are hurting, and they need what only Jesus can offer. They need Christians like you and me to tell the story repeatedly. Your witness is powerful because the Holy Spirit can use it to change lives. It is powerful because it is the message that has been shared for centuries and has helped millions. So when God gives you a chance to speak, let others know how much Jesus cares. Amen.

5. Iconium – What does success look like?

Acts 14:1-7

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

Acts 14:1-7 At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. ² But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴ The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. ⁵ There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. ⁶ But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, ⁷ where they continued to preach the good news.

Two steps forward and one step back

Ministry often seems like a dance. Two steps forward and one back. We whirl around and round the room like a couple doing the waltz and end up back at the same place we started. Are we getting anywhere, and does it matter? So often, churches and even pastors begin to wonder. Why can't we be more like St. Paul in the bible? Give us grand tours that will bring the message of salvation to kings and countries. Let us do and see miracles that will convince the world that you are God and that they should all come to church and give generously of their time and resources.

Oddly, Paul's ministry was more like a waltz than the powerful church we often imagine the early church to be. Paul danced forward and back, but unlike us, he did not give up. He made progress but often had to keep pushing forward to make any progress at all. Remember that this is the area of the Galatians where Paul complains that they have given up the gospel. Realize also that you would be hard-pressed to find a Christian church in this region today. When you are ready to give up, look at Paul and learn why the dance is significant.

The ups and downs of ministry

A. A remarkable number believed v. 1 *At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.*

Again, Paul and Barnabas are asked to speak at the synagogue, unleashing God's power. What had happened in Pisidian Antioch was no fluke. The message of the death and resurrection of Jesus changed hearts. The text tells us that a significant number of Jews and Gentiles believed. You can feel the buzz around the town. Without radio or television, the word was passed from person to person to come and hear this message about Jesus. The Messiah had come. This God differed from Roman and Greek gods because He cared about people. Come and hear of this God of love.

When the church speaks out about Jesus, it changes people. Such reactions are still possible. People need to know that there is a God who loves them. People need to know that there is a God who forgives their guilt and will help them overcome the brokenness in life. Yes, we must overcome decades of church messages that people are all going to hell and a culture that has become anti-Christian. The truth is that many are searching for answers, and we have them in Christ. We must be willing to share how God has loved and helped us and will help them.

B. Jews stir up the opposition to Paul v. 2. *But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.*

When the Jews saw the crowds, their hearts were filled with envy. Jesus did not fit in with their ideals. They felt Jesus was stealing good Jewish people from their churches, so they began a smear campaign against Paul and Barnabas by contradicting their message about Jesus. Satan did not want Paul to focus

this town on Jesus. He had control of the hearts of this town and was not ready to give it up so quickly. He used the Jewish leaders and their sense of losing power and prestige to attack Paul and Barnabas. They wanted the message about Jesus quieted.

It was a battle between good and evil. We often forget that it is the church's battleground. Satan has the hearts of many and wants to destroy the lives of many people in our culture. We think that he will give in easily. Say a few prayers with good intentions, and he will roll over and die. The opposite is true. He is powerful and will not go down without a fight. Christians will face his wrath, and it will be uncomfortable. That is why so many churches and Christians are silent. It is easier to go under the radar. Let others feel his wrath and anger.

C. Paul speaks even more v. 3a *So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord,*

Paul doesn't give in. He begins a counterattack. The persecution was at least part of why Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time here. They were making progress and threatening Satan, so they stayed to make it even more challenging for Satan. Paul saw that he was making inroads into people's lives and would not give up. He knew the power of the gospel and that it could defeat Satan. Thus there were no excuses and no letting up. Paul was willing to grapple for every soul in Iconium and save everyone he could.

When attacked or things don't go as well or quickly as they should, I often get quiet and give up. The trouble is that Satan has won when I do that. It is easy to believe that opposition means that I need a better way to do my ministry. Sometimes resistance means that you are hitting home and succeeding. God would have us keep talking about the gospel. Don't be mean like others. Don't let others keep you silent about your faith. Keep talking about the incredible things that Jesus is doing for you. The world around us desperately needs to hear, and you will have to grapple for people's souls.

D. God confirms their ministry with miracles v. 3b *the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.*

God gives the disciples a fantastic tool in a world filled with skepticism. He confirms the message with miracles and wonders. While faith can't be based on miracles, it is often bolstered by miracles. People see through the miracles that the message comes from God. It was God's exclamation point to the gospel that Paul was proclaiming. It should have silenced the Jews because they were seeing the power of God. It may have caught the Gentiles' attention, who were ready to believe in a God who flexed his muscle and showed his power.

God still gives miracles. He sends a dozen visitors to come and worship with us on one Sunday. The Lord organizes our people to feed dozens of hungry people in the inner city. He sends a visitor who He is preparing to lead the church, teach a bible study class, or manage a garden. When God's people are doing ministry in his name, the Lord sends signs and wonders to encourage them and grab the world's attention. God puts the exclamation mark in our ministry, for He wants our ministry to change lives and heal broken hearts.

What did you expect? v.5 *There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them.*

The result was division and a plan to mistreat them. It was becoming a pattern for Paul. In Pisidian Antioch, they expel them. Here they plan to stone them, and in Lystra next week, they will stone Paul and leave him for dead. His Galatian tour is a rousing success – at least in God's eyes. He may have been abused, but he left people behind in each town who were brought to faith in Jesus. His success is in the hundreds and thousands of people exposed to the gospel who came to know Jesus as their savior. He tore those people out of Satan's grasp and paid the price.

We can't measure success in the ease of our ministry, but whether we have brought people closer to the Lord. Did we share the gospel? Did we see the Holy Spirit at work changing lives? Did we help broken people to turn to the Lord for His mercy? If so, we were a success. It may be challenging. It was not easy for Paul, and it wasn't easy for others. Yet, they continued because they wanted to see souls won for Jesus. They knew what it was firsthand to go from darkness into the light of Jesus. Having been a Christian all my life, I don't know what people are up against in the darkness. Paul did.

God gets the glory v.7 *where they continued to preach the good news.*

Paul kept on going. His work was not in vain. Stop and think about what his ministry would have been like if he had stopped here. We would barely know about Paul. Instead, we praise the Lord for his efforts over a thirty-year ministry that stretched from Antioch in Syria to Spain. Yes, his ministry was often two steps forward and one back, but that will let you make progress if you have the patience to keep going. We usually don't make progress because we are so afraid of the step back that we never keep taking the two steps forward.

We also are looking to ourselves instead of giving glory to the Lord. Paul wasn't worried about his progress. He was concerned if people were coming to know Jesus and the salvation of the cross. In a town that had not known Jesus, now some were willing to fight for Jesus. That was wonderful. What would America look like if Christians were not so quiet but were willing to speak the gospel and change their world? Yes, there would be divisions, but there would be so many more people who know the comfort of Jesus and live in his peace and not the brokenness that plagues so many in America.

6. Counterattack

Acts 14:8-20

Big idea: If you are successful, expect Satan to oppose your witness

Acts 14:8-20 In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked.⁹ He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed¹⁰ and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.¹¹ When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!"¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker.¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting:¹⁵ "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them."¹⁶ In the past, he let all nations go their own way.¹⁷ Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."¹⁸ Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.¹⁹ Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.²⁰ But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

Just when things are going so well.

As Paul and Barnabas travel into new regions, they never know what to expect. The duo has had some great successes. God worked a miracle on Cyprus, and the proconsul came to faith, opening the whole island to Christ. Paul speaks boldly in synagogues and leaves churches behind in their wake. Yet, you can't just expect Satan to take it lying down. In the text, we see two of his preferred methods of counterattack. First, he tries to compromise the message, and then he tries to destroy the witness. The battle Paul has with Satan will continue for decades. It is part of sharing your faith.

Do you ever wonder why there is trouble when things seem to be going so well? You see a church growing like gangbusters and reaching out to its community. Then, suddenly, the church has money problems, members transfer out of the area, or the church splits. What happened? You can bet that it is Satan's counterattack. Satan doesn't bother churches that barely exist and will close on their own inertia. Satan is afraid, however, when a church is active and making inroads into the lost in its community. Now you have attacked his kingdom, and he will strike back.

Opportunity and success

Paul preaches, and people listen v. 9 *He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed.*

Paul planned to preach at the synagogue and gather a base of Jewish converts to take the city. Yet, there was a problem. This city had no synagogue. That is not a problem for Paul. So, Barnabas and Paul begin to preach. They preach for several days, probably to small groups in the streets. They are simply doing what God has called them to do, and it begins to work. Some, like this lame man, are coming to faith. Some are starting to bring their friends. The gospel's message is powerful, and those hungry for answers will listen to it and learn from it.

Sometimes, we make witnessing too hard. We will spend hours talking about things in meetings. We will look at demographics and consult surveys. We will rehearse different options when all we need to do is pray, pray some more, and share the gospel. The church grows when its people speak the gospel. Yes, the ministry will start small but will grow and be very powerful. God has the message that so many in our

day need. He has real words of hope when life isn't looking so good. He has honest answers to people's problems.

A miracle showed everyone God's power and love v.10 *and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.*

It takes just a single piece of kindling to blow up the whole city for God. It begins when a lame man listens to Paul and comes to faith. Paul sees this man's pain and uses this opportunity to free him from his physical bondage. He looks him in the eye and performs a miracle. The miracle cracks the city wide open. Everyone knows that this man has been lame since birth. They see him doing the impossible and know that this is the work of God. Suddenly, people who ignored Paul and Barnabas focused on these men and their message.

The kindness of God's people and the power of God often open hearts around us to the gospel. They notice a church that reaches out to help a person whose house has burned. They see a church active with children in the schools and the community. Our love and God's power change lives. God is freeing people from their limitations and bringing joy to their lives. People will want to hear what is going on. They will flock to see God's miracles done through that church.

Satan opposes the ministry.

Test 1: Worship the speaker to compromise the message v.13 *The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.*

Satan is horrified at the power of the gospel. The city is on the verge of having a major revival. And so he tries to glorify the speaker so that the message is minimized. Bring on the bulls and wreaths so we can worship Paul and make everyone think that he did the miracle, not God. Here is an appeal to Paul's ego. Imagine entering a strange city and having everyone welcome you as a god. You are excited about the crowds and see the chance to do something great. It will be a great revival like they had in Cyprus. Aren't we great?

Satan likes to glorify the preacher and the church so that people forget about the Lord. Make the church grow, so everyone focuses on the building and the pastor. People will begin to think that great music or programs made the church grow. They see the miracles of man and not of God. Soon people are drawn by the congregation's splendor and size of the church and not by the message. The message has to be cute, and the coffee in the entryway has to be good. Satan diverts us from the gospel so that God is pushed into the background and other things are the focus.

Answer: Testify to the true God v.17 *Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons;*

How does Paul keep that from happening? First, he points to the almighty God. We are just mortals; let me tell you about the God who made the entire world that surrounds you. The Earth was here before I was because God made it for you. The miracle that just happened is nothing compared to what God can do. Paul then talks about how such a mighty God is merciful and just. He is gracious because he has not destroyed the world for its sin. Yet He is just and will want a reckoning for sin. Come close, and I will tell you what God did so that you can have salvation and not punishment.

I am amazed when a growing church continues to point to the Lord. It resists the temptations to do things bigger and more exciting. It spends time and money getting people into Bible study and helping them serve. At the center of their church is the cross. Here is the place where they see the Lord's love. Here is where lives change, and people grow hope. Other things may impress and even draw crowds, but the church is the place to meet God. When people glorify you, point to God and praise Him.

Test 2: Turn the crowd against you v.19 *Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.*

Sadly, the gospel isn't always what people want to hear. The miracle has given a great forum to Paul so that the whole city is listening. Paul tries to show them the true God is greater than Zeus and the gods of the Romans. The people are upset that He has rejected their glory. At that moment, Satan brings Jews from the other Galatian cities to stir up trouble against Paul. Satan works to make the people who loved Paul feel rejected and deceived. The crowd gets violent and drags Paul's "dead" body out of town.

Often our very words of love are turned against us. We try to proclaim the love of Jesus and are accused of being narrow-minded or short-sighted. Satan controls some people so that their minds and hearts are closed. He doesn't want people to hear your words and come to faith. Realize that when they get angry or say hurtful words, they are mad at God. Satan turns people against us because he closes their minds to the truth of God. They can't change God, and so they reject you. They can't make God follow them, so they will not follow God.

Despite the abuse, Paul will not stop sharing the gospel v.20 *But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.*

I imagine Barnabas and the disciples gathering around Paul and weeping over the death of their friend. How surprised they must have been when Paul gets up and returns to the city. Despite the abuse, Paul will not stop sharing the gospel. He will come back to this city to strengthen the infant church. He will return here during the second and third missionary journeys. Here, Paul meets Timothy, who becomes like a son to him. Satan left Paul on the dung heap and thought the apostle was done. Yet, Paul would continue to plant churches and change lives all over Asia Minor and Greece.

Trouble comes when you think that things are going well. It is not you. It is the message. Satan doesn't want the church or its people to share the message of salvation. As you speak, know that not everyone will want to hear about how loving God is or how much He has done for them. Yet, know that we must continue to speak. There will always be some like Timothy who will come to faith when you least expect it. It is for them that we witness so that God can change their lives. Satan can only be defeated by the gospel. The more we speak, the weaker he gets.

Pentecost
The ordinary becomes extraordinary
Acts 2:1-21

Big idea: God can do extraordinary things with ordinary people

Acts 2:1-21 ¹ When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs--we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine." ¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ "'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. ¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. ²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. ²¹ And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

They were 12 ordinary men.

After all, who were these twelve men in the upper room? You had a group of fishermen like Peter, Andrew, James, and John. You had a tax collector named Matthew and a zealot named Simon. All were second-rate Galileans; the only Judean was Judas. None was remarkable in the way of the world. You would have thought that Jesus would have asked people like Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea to be one of the disciples. Yet, he chose ordinary men the world would not have even noticed as the twelve disciples. That could be on purpose so we would see God's power, not theirs.

Maybe that was so that all of us might realize what God can do with us if we let him. For you see, Pentecost is about ordinary men who were able to do extraordinary things through the power of God. They would birth a church that day by God's power and not theirs. That is why I want you to put yourself in their position today. Don't think of them in lofty terms, but think about how you might have been Peter or Mary on that first Pentecost and what God could have done through you. God can do extraordinary things with ordinary people – even you.

God thinks big

He took men wondering what to do next v. 1 *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.*

The day started just like the other days. It had been ten days since Jesus had ascended to heaven. Each day, they had thought something was going to happen, only to be disappointed. Surely it would not happen today – it was the feast of Pentecost, and the streets were crowded with travelers. The disciples started the day as they had started the last nine. First, they gathered together and prayed. Then, they

recalled their life with Jesus and tried to figure out the meaning of the previous three years. After their prayer, they would go to the temple and participate in Pentecost, celebrating the grain harvest.

But after that, what would be next? Jesus' command to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and the world seemed overwhelming. Where would they start, and how could the 12 or even the 120 making up the group do such a great thing? They were just ordinary people. They had no influence in state affairs and no standing in the temple. They feared the Sanhedrin that had condemned Jesus and the Romans who had crucified him. What were they going to do?

He empowered them with the Holy Spirit v. 4. *All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

Yet, during their prayer time, something extraordinary came. The text says they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other tongues. The time had come, and God was about to work mightily through these ordinary men. The Spirit had come upon them. So, the first thing that the Spirit did for these ordinary men and all who would be servants was to bring understanding to their minds. Truths that they had been pondering and praying about came into focus. They understood why Jesus had died and what he had meant about their future.

The second thing that happens to all who would serve is a change of heart. These men huddled in the upper room with fear suddenly became bold. They had a vision of God's plan and the courage to go and let the Spirit lead them. They were changed from the inside to do powerful things. The final thing that happened was that the bodies were equipped with the power of God. In the text, they begin to speak in other tongues. It was needed if they were to witness to the array of travelers from around the world. The Spirit gives the gifts that the church requires to do God's task.

He set them boldly before the world v. 14 *Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.*

And it was God's time to bring them before the world. Notice the list of nations that are represented in the streets that day. They came from the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. They represented people of different races and skin colors. Peter, who denied his Lord less than two months before this, now stands in front of the world. He wants them to understand that this is a day predicted in the Old Testament. Peter wants them to know that God has worked this wonder, and His mighty hand has brought the world to hear his message.

Finally, Peter wants them to know that salvation has come from Jesus Christ. Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord today will be saved. So come, see the cross, and bow before it so that you may have its power and live in peace with God in this life and the next. All the parts had come together as God had wanted. On this day, the Spirit came upon the disciples as the crowds were gathered so that the world would be changed. Three thousand would come to faith that day, taking the message out to the nations on three continents that Jesus was alive and that God had forgiven them.

We need to think big.

Think of what God will make of you, not what you are now.

Everything begins with us thinking of what we can be if the Lord wants to use us. Too often we think of ourselves without the Lord. I am just a fisherman. I am just a tax collector. The disciples could have focused only on what they were without Jesus. We could too, but we shouldn't. Think of what you can do if the Lord empowers you. You could visit others and show them that someone cares. You could lead a small group. You could change lives and even be part of miracles. We are talking about what you can do with the power of God, not with your puny resources.

I want every congregation to start thinking like they already had 100, 200, or even 1000 members. Think of what we could do with great programs. Think of how we could sponsor a preschool or a food

pantry. Think of the music that we could have on Sunday morning with a larger church. The power to do those things lies in the Lord and what He can do if we are willing to follow His lead and become the church that He wants us to be. What could you and this church take on if we believed that God would help us do miraculous things?

Will you be an extraordinary person? Will this be an extraordinary church?

It is often said that those kinds of things happened in Bible times, but cannot happen today. I would disagree with that. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He still works powerfully and I want to share two ordinary people who were extraordinary in his power. Such saints still exist today. I knew a simple farmer who had raised his kids on the plains of Nebraska, he was a man who taught me the generosity of the Lord. He gave generously to his church and the Lord gave even more to him. He never could outgive the Lord.

I knew an editor at CPH who started as an ordinary teacher in a Lutheran school and became one of the best editors that CPH ever had. She was a woman of faith who taught the people whose work she edited touching people with her faith and her love for the Lord. They were each simple people who lived in the power of the Lord. Each was bigger than the people around them because of the power of the Lord that lived in them. Each has a legacy that will continue to cry out for many years. God can do extraordinary things with ordinary people