

The
New
Testament
in a Year

Week 7

Acts 7-11

This week's reflector is

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Whereas Luke is the good news story of Jesus, Acts is the good news story of the Holy Spirit. This week, as you hear about the Holy Spirit at work in the early church, reflect on how the Spirit is also at work in your life.

In the words of the United Church's new "Song of Faith": *We sing of God the Spirit, faithful and untameable, who is creatively and redemptively active in the world.*

Monday

Acts 7

This chapter continues the story of Stephen, begun in chapter 6. As Stephen defends himself and the Christian faith to the Jewish leadership, he begins by retelling the stories at the heart of Judaism: The promise of God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Exodus from Egypt lead by Moses. The rebellion of the Israelites in the desert. The conquest of the Holy Land. The building of the Temple under David and Solomon.

Note Stephen's use of the word "our" throughout the stories. When does he switch to using "you/your?" What is the point Stephen is trying to make to the Jewish leaders?

Have you ever had to confront people whom you believed were wrong? Have you ever needed to be confronted? How did it turn out?

By the end of the chapter the early church has its first recorded Martyr.

How would your church respond if a member were killed for defending the faith?

Tuesday

Acts 8

For the early Jewish Christians, the break away from the synagogue was both traumatic and at times violent. At the time Luke-Acts was likely written, both church and synagogue faced great upheaval. Neither could continue as they had before. Sound familiar in our present situations?

Today we meet Saul and Philip. Remembering that these stories were written for the Christians, I find myself faced with two reactions to radical change: Fight to keep things the same, or be blown by the Spirit to new places and new experiences.

Which of these reactions does your congregation tend toward? How about you?

In your life, when has a horrible experience turned into an opportunity for faith to blossom when you trusted the Holy Spirit?

Wednesday

Acts 9

Chapter 9 divides into two sections.

The first about Saul and his conversion into Paul. The second takes us back to Peter and sets up for what is to come in chapter 10. We'll deal with Peter tomorrow! Both are stories of amazing change. Both are stories pivotal to the shape of the future church.

The story of Saul teaches us that no one is beyond the saving, transforming, power of God. Even one who actively opposes and violently persecutes the church can be brought within the fold. So powerful is the gospel of Jesus! So gracious is our God!

The story also teaches us that such radical transformation is not easy, both for the one being transformed and for the rest of the church. *How hard is it to trust someone who appears to have changed? How do you know if the change is authentic? Does it matter, for the way you treat them?*

Thursday

Acts 10

Having set up for this story at the end of chapter 9, today we read of Peter's great revelation. This is one of my favourite stories in the New Testament. Please read the whole chapter, then come back to this guide.

Some thoughts:

Prayer matters. God communicates with us when we are open to God through prayer. *What does this teach me about the way I pray?*

God has already been at work for some time setting up every situation I walk into. This is both comforting and scary. Perhaps the most important thing we do is to discern what God is already up to in any given situation, and get on board.

There's no such thing as an "outsider!" No one is beyond God's love and grace. The boundaries we believe are permanent are imaginary, or worse, of our own creation. *Who is God sending us that we need to welcome and accept?*

How could Peter's revelation (Acts 10:34-35) change our churches?

Friday

Acts 11

Here we are told that it was in Antioch that believers were first called "Christians." As you read this chapter, consider the marks of these early communities of Christians called churches.

- Diversity and unity. Jews and non-Jews believing in Jesus; worshipping and living together.
- The Holy Spirit active in their midst.
- Decisions made by remembering and building on the words of Jesus.
- Sharing their faith with those God brings to them.
- Generosity toward those in need.

What would you add to this list? Does this sound like your church?

How is your church growing and evolving? Who are you reaching out to, across traditional boundaries?

Who in your church would you say is a good person, full of the Holy Spirit and faith? How do you encourage their leadership? How does your church rejoice, when you see the grace of God in your midst?

What mission projects are you involved with? What reputation does your church have in the larger community?