

The
New
Testament
in a Year

Week 8

Acts 12-16

*This week's reflector is **Rob Irish**. He is a member of Wellington Square Church in Burlington, and worked on these reflections while procrastinating from other work.*

General Thoughts for this week

This week Acts turns its attention away from Peter to focus on Paul. We can be grateful to both of these men of faith. Consider what each has given us by his faithful testimony.

What is their model of leadership? How can we live as faithfully as they did?

As you read, consider who has been a Peter or Paul in your life testifying faithfully to God's call, perhaps challenging you to walk more faithfully (Colossians 2:6) or be holy (1 Peter 1:15)?

Monday

Acts 12

In this chapter, two miracles sit in stark contrast: Peter escapes and God strikes Herod for blasphemy. A godly man is set free; a blasphemer is struck down. Such a contrast suggests that Luke knew how to tell a story.

It is tempting to see these miracles as fables but they come with some striking details: James has been killed, Peter's guard complement is documented, Peter assumes he's dreaming, a servant girl – named Rhoda – gets so excited she forgets to open the door! In the details lies the power.

Truth is no one expects Peter. The little Christian community has lost another leader, yet they pray. Indeed, there is a kind of midnight tent meeting going on when Peter knocks on the door. God has other plans for Peter. His leadership is still needed.

Questions for us: What would it take to stir us to such passion in prayer? If we prayed for our leaders with such commitment perhaps we too would see God at work. Choose a leader – your minister, our moderator, a government leader – and pray for them today. Then listen for the knock.

Tuesday

Acts 13

Today's reading depicts the beginning of Paul's missionary work. Notice how their community sends them: fasting, prayer, and laying on hands. These beautiful gestures show shared commitment.

The chapter highlights Paul's sermon in Pisidian Antioch. Paul is speaking to Jews (or "God-fearers"), and he recites Israel's history from Exodus to Jesus. He wants them to know that Jesus' coming and resurrection are the next development in Israel's relationship with God.

A rabbi comes preaching a Messiah – a fulfillment of Jewish longing – but crucified! Surely not, a Messiah would rule. But then raised from the dead? These were shocking words. Then, the clincher to the message: freedom. What the Law of Moses could not do, God had done in Jesus.

When the Jewish leaders reject Paul, he turns to the Gentiles who receive the message with joy. God has included them! They "were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (v.52).

Question for reflection: How do we receive God's message? Are we critical and contradictory or filled with joy? Look for joy in what the Holy Spirit is doing around you (even if your leader is chased out of town).

Wednesday

Acts 14

Wherever the gospel gets preached, it divides people. In Paul's day, like today, some hear and accept what they hear, while others reject it – sometimes angrily.

In Lystra, healing a man goes very wrong. First, the crowd that sees the healing decides that Paul and Barnabas are gods and want to sacrifice to them. How often do we also mistake what God is doing and offer our gratitude in the wrong direction?

Then, the bitter Jews from Antioch and Iconium stir the people against Paul and he is stoned, supposedly to death. This abrupt change sounds like the about-face between Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

Paul offers us a better model. Despite his treatment in these towns, he returns to each, strengthens the Jesus followers and organizes leadership. And just as the community did for him when he set out on the journey, he fasts and prays and commissions them to service.

Question for reflection: What is in this message of love that is so threatening? How can we convey the message of God's freedom in the face of resistance or indifference in our own time?

Thursday

Acts 15

This is the second time we see a church council (first was in chapter 11). This time it is even bigger. Their question is essential to the mission of the church: What does it mean to practice the faith?

We can get bogged down in the details – circumcision or not, kosher or not, the Law or not – but Peter cuts through the red tape: “we believe we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are.” (verse 11). Who can argue? Whatever issues a church faces, we are all dependent on the grace of our Lord Jesus.

After the principle is laid out, James supports it in two ways: scripture and wisdom. True wisdom is grounded in scripture like this (from Amos' promise to restore God's people). James wisely offers a reasonable compromise: avoid the most offensive behaviours. How many of our conflicts would be resolved if we too could just work together to avoid the most offensive behaviours?

In the letter after the meeting, James writes, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” These are the words of a true discernor – seek both God and the affirmation of community. It offers a good model for any church in any time.

Friday

Acts 16

This chapter begins Paul's second mission trip with two striking episodes.

Episode 1: Silence and Vision

Paul's little company is so attuned the Spirit that they obey even when the instruction seems to contradict the purpose of their mission. They are “forbidden” to speak and “prevented” from going by the Spirit. Then, with a vision, doors open to major centres like Philippi. Too often, we want the vision and direction without the silent waiting.

Episode 2: Singing in the Pain

Philippi was a Roman colony where soldiers went to retire. So when Paul and Silas are accused of anti-Roman activity, that is serious indeed. They are beaten and tossed in stocks, yet they sing. (The other prisoners are listening, so let's hope they sang well). Whether the earthquake is a miracle or a coincidence it leads to a miracle: the jailer comes to faith.

And along with the jailer comes his whole household. As jailer, he expected to die for losing his prisoners, so when they are still there he is so grateful that he wakes up the house and everyone catches the excitement. They are baptized and feast.

Question for reflection: what song or hymn sustains you? How might you praise God when you're in a tough spot?