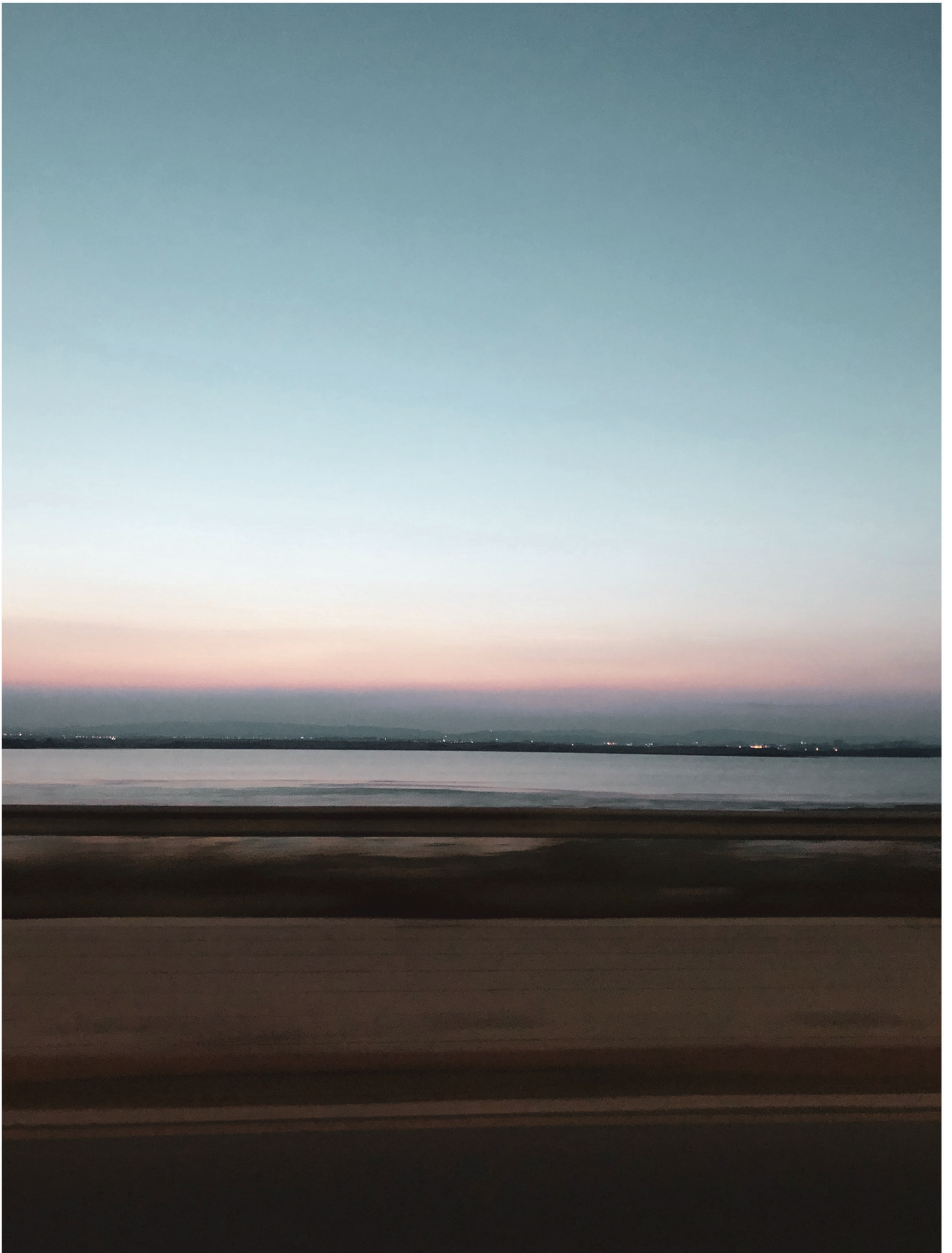




ACTS







ACTS OF THE APOSTLES OVERVIEW

ACTS IS THE STORY OF SOME OF THE FIRST FOLLOWERS OF JESUS—A STORY FULL OF DISCOVERY: EVERYTHING WAS NEW & UNEXPECTED. “WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT?” “WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO FOLLOW JESUS NOW?”

“THE MYSTERIOUS PRESENCE OF JESUS HAUNTS THE WHOLE STORY OF ACTS. JESUS IS ANNOUNCED AS KING AND LORD, NOT AS AN INCREASINGLY DISTANT MEMORY BUT AS A LIVING AND POWERFUL REALITY, A PERSON WHO CAN BE KNOWN AND LOVED, OBEYED AND FOLLOWED, A PERSON WHO CONTINUES TO ACT WITHIN THE REAL WORLD. WE CALL THE BOOK “THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES,” BUT WE SHOULD THINK OF IT AS “THE ACTS OF JESUS: PART TWO.”

- N.T. WRIGHT

AUTHOR

Luke—the author of one of the four Gospels found in the New Testament of the Bible also composed Acts. Luke intended his Gospel and Acts as a two-volume set.

Luke is the only known Gentile (non-Jewish) writer in the New Testament. Interestingly, Luke was not an eyewitness of Jesus. Luke — based on the prelude in Luke chapter 1 is functioning as an historian in a way the first century reader would understand.

Luke collected eyewitness accounts of the life, stories and teachings of Jesus —and collated them together in his two volume set. Fun fact: roughly 50% of Luke's collected stories of Jesus are NOT found in any other Gospel! Fun fact 2: Luke records 18 parables not found in the other Gospels—including “the Good Samaritan” and “the Prodigal Son.”

Luke was a co-worker with Paul the apostle who contributed to a large portion of the writings of the New Testament and is believed to have been a native of Antioch. It's possible a fair amount of Acts from Antioch on is potentially a first-person eyewitness account of this unfolding Jesus Movement.



TITLE & GENRE

The title "Acts of the Apostles" was not part of the original text. It was first used by a second century church leader named Irenaeus. Some have suggested that the title "Acts" be interpreted as "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" or even "The Acts of Jesus." Acts 1 gives the reader the impression that this is an account of what Jesus continued to do and teach. The word "Acts" is a recognized genre in the ancient world: "characterizing books that described great deeds of people or of cities."



DATE

The original edition of Acts undoubtedly was written in the second half of the first century-within 30-40 years of Jesus' resurrection.

Since Acts does not mention the death of Paul the apostle nor the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, this original edition was likely penned before both events. (Paul was beheaded by Caesar Nero in Rome between 62-67CE. The Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by Rome in 70CE).

AUDIENCE: HELLO THEOPHILUS



The name “Theophilus” literally means “loved by God,” and carries the idea of “friend of God.” This could mean “Theophilus” is a generic title that applies to all Christians. But from the context of Luke and Acts, it is also probable Luke is writing to a specific individual.

Luke addresses Theophilus as “most excellent,” a title often used when referring to someone of honor or rank, such as a Roman official. Paul used the same term when addressing Felix (Acts 23:26; Acts 24:2) and Festus (Acts 26:25). It is possible-perhaps probable Theophilus was a Roman officer or high-ranking official in the Roman government.

Another suggestion is that Theophilus was a wealthy influential leader in Antioch. Intriguingly there are second-century references to a man named Theophilus who was “a great lord” and a leader in Antioch during the time of Luke. Many scholars believe that Theophilus could have been a wealthy benefactor who supported Paul and Luke on their missionary journeys. That could account for Luke’s wanting to provide an orderly and detailed account of the stories of Jesus and the rapid expansion of Jesus’ Church.



3 KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING ACTS

1.

Everything is based on (or hinges on) the resurrection of Jesus.

The closing chapter in the Gospel of Luke describes scenes in which Jesus met his followers after being raised from the dead: he was really alive, richly alive, in a transformed body that could eat and drink as well as walk and talk but which seemed to have . . . some unexpected properties. His body could, for instance, appear and disappear, and come and go through locked doors.

Jesus' transformed body is ground zero of God's new creation. Jesus' risen body is the beginning of a brand new reality which is both at home in this physical world, and which is at home in the heavenly sphere.

Without the resurrection there is no gospel, no ongoing work of Jesus. There would only be the sad memory of a great, but failed teacher and would-be Messiah.



2.

The very tangible presence of the Holy Spirit is at work throughout the early church at all times.

Luke insists that the Holy Spirit is present – guiding and leading these first followers of Jesus—just as Jesus promised when he called the Holy Spirit his “representative” who will “lead [us] into all truth”.

3.

This Jesus movement is for EVERYONE.

One of the core central themes of Acts, indeed of the New Testament, is that Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and teachings were for all of humanity—Jews and Gentiles, young and old, men and women, rich and poor. Over time, this Jesus Movement was increasingly seen as distinct from Judaism, which both unleashed a movement of unexpected radical hospitality in Jesus's name while also unleashing waves of resistance and persecution from the Roman government and cultural elites.

SPOILER

ACTS doesn't really end . . . it has an ending which isn't really an ending: the story just keeps going and going: we are literally living out the continuation of Acts today.

What might Jesus be up to as you go about living your everyday life? What would it look like for you to join Jesus in his mission through you?

#1 ONE THING.

Acts 1 | THE MISSION OF JESUS IN
THE HEARTS OF HIS PEOPLE

Picture this. You have been part of this crowd of people who have been following around a man who has been healing people left and right, even raising a man from the dead ... Then you see Him die an unjust death ... only to discover 3 days later, He did not stay dead either! Jesus rose from the dead and He appeared to His followers on multiple occasions.

Now enter the Book of Acts. As Luke writes, he mentions his first book – the Gospel of Luke – which was all about what Jesus began to do ... Implying this book would be all about what Jesus CONTINUED to do. There is a twist we see in this first chapter though. Jesus ascends to heaven ... leaving His followers, but not leaving them with nothing ...

EXAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS:

What would it have been like for you to be there, see Jesus ascend, be met by men in white robes (angels?) and not know what to do next? How would you feel about watching this scene?



#2 A NEW COMMUNITY.

Acts 2 | THE LAUNCH OF THE CHURCH

The Holy Spirit had been promised throughout the Scriptures and by Jesus himself (check out John 14-16). The Holy Spirit was to be an advocate, a representative of Jesus, a comforter – a way to continually be united with God.

Notice how the coming of the Holy Spirit brought this group together in a common way. While the apostles began to preach, the message was heard by each listener in their own heart-language.

This leads to Peter sharing this GOOD NEWS of Jesus and 3,000 people were added as followers of Jesus. Following this huge event, the chapter ends with the lives of the believers becoming devoted to this teaching and more were continually added. It seems that as each person encountered the love of Jesus, everything in their lives began to shift. It changed everything.

EXAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS:

What do you think the 3,000 people who were baptized thought they were joining?
What does real community look like to you?



#3 GIVE GOOD AWAY.

Acts 3 | PETER HEALS THE CRIPPLED BEGGAR

The disciples were giving away all they had to live out this mission of Jesus in its new Spirit-filled form. Chapter three continues with even more surprises. Peter and John, on their way to the temple, run into a crippled beggar. They are poor, and seemingly have nothing to offer. Yet, there is one thing they do have. Peter pulls him to his feet and the man is miraculously healed! People are filled with wonder and amazement! It all started with Peter noticing a need and then offering what he had. It was not what this man had expected to receive either.

The expected a small token, but received so much more. The ways of Jesus are filled with stories like this. It is the way the Good News transforms lives through those who are willing to notice and give good away. Through this, Peter is able to share the hope and forgiveness found in Jesus with the crowd that had formed. Not to give it away, but in the next chapter we will get to see what happens to those around us as we live out the ways of Jesus each day.

EXAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS:

What fills you with wonder?

Have you ever felt like you had nothing to give?

What did you do?

Has someone ever been generous toward you?



#4 THE COURAGE OF ORDINARY PEOPLE.

Acts 4 | PETER & JOHN BEFORE THE COUNCIL

As promised, there is a grand finale moment to chapter three's events found here in Acts chapter four. As Peter was able to share the Good News because of the attention that was drawn from the miracle of healing, **MANY MORE** people believed as a result . . . **2,000 MORE!** Luke is intentional in including the Holy Spirit's work in and through the disciples. The momentum was building, and it was not due to any single person, or any overtly talented person, but the Holy Spirit guiding and giving wisdom and confidence.

Not everyone was excited about what Peter and John were up to. As you will read, they also faced opposition. Notice how these men respond. Their posture is sticking to the truth about Jesus – and to pray for boldness. They continue to gather together, pray for each other, and share their possessions.

EXAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS:

When was a time you were able to be courageous or bold?

What do you think it would have been like to be opposed like Peter and John were?

What do you think it felt like to be the ones opposing them?

Why do you think the story keeps coming back to the believers gathered together and sharing?



#5 PEOPLE PROBLEMS. PART ONE.

Acts 5 | EXTERNAL PROBLEMS (PERSECUTION)

While this chapter starts out with something that may seem a bit stark, it moves into healings, signs, and wonders as the Apostles continue to share the Good News of Jesus. As the numbers continue to grow, so does the opposition. It seems the religious leaders were opposed to the ways in which these followers of Jesus were disrupting the status quo of their community. They were jealous to the point they arrested, tried, and flogged the apostles. Ultimately the apostles are released and end up praising God for the opportunity to suffer for the sake of Christ.

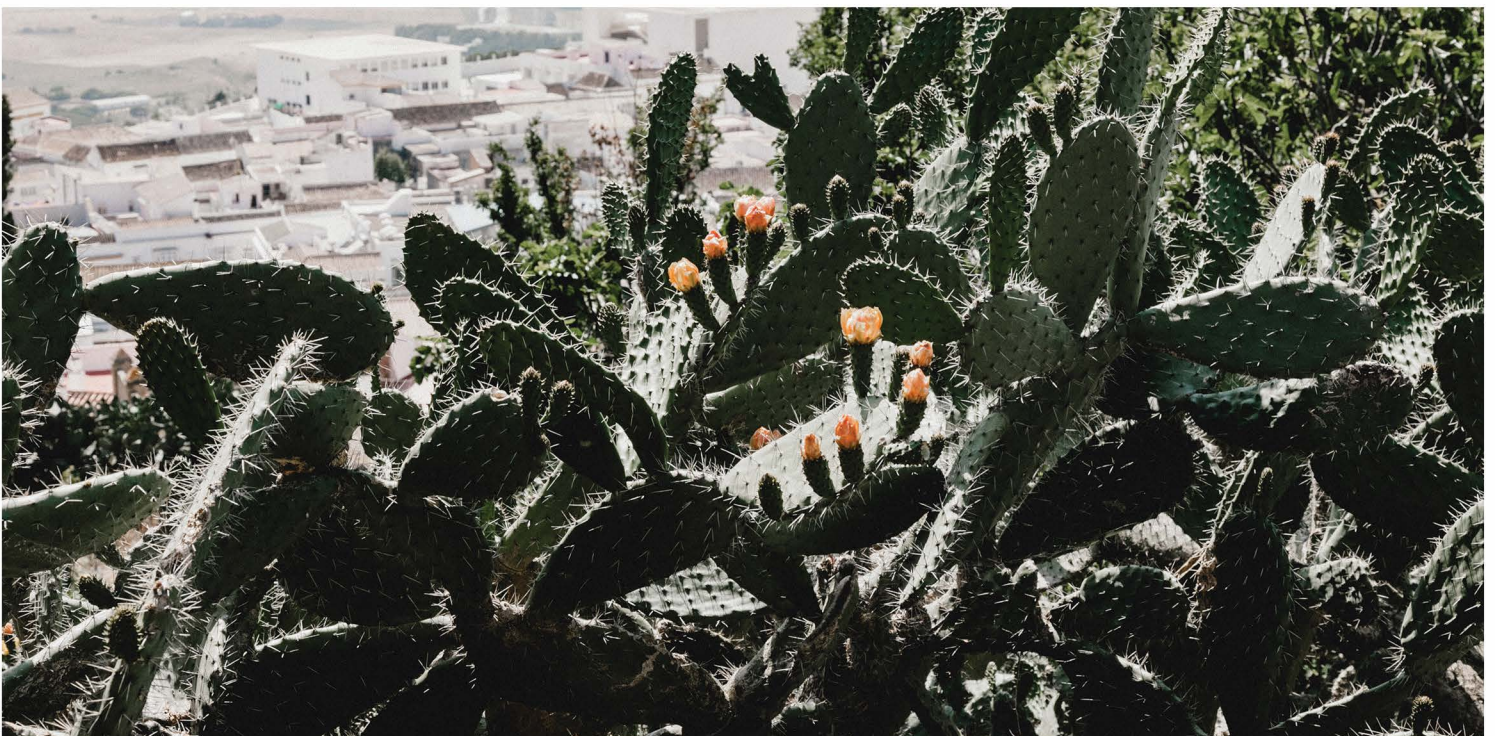
Relationships can be messy, especially where there are entire groups of people who seem to all belong to the same group but do not agree. There are so many things that can divide us, especially when we do not understand. It seems these followers of Jesus lean into the tension instead of trying to avoid it, even though it is quite uncomfortable.

EXAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS:

As you read this chapter together, what stands out to you in the words the apostles use with the religious leaders?

Where do you feel that tension in your own life?

What seems to be the invitation of Jesus in your own situations where you are feeling tension?



#6 PEOPLE PROBLEMS. PART TWO.

Acts 6 | INTERNAL PROBLEMS (DISCRIMINATION)

Disagreements are going to happen. During such a time of transition for the Jewish people, it was bound to be confusing. Sometimes when we cannot understand what is going on around us the temptation is to judge. Judgement so often can lead to asking people to pick sides and even discriminate. In this shorter chapter we see the stirring of not only outside influences of tension, but internal problems that arise as well. How these types of scenarios are handled make all the difference.

In the first part of the chapter we see what it looks like when time is taken to pause, recognize the problem and to offer a solution. In the second half of the chapter, people are intentionally stirring up division. It will be in chapter seven where we will see the results of this other way.

EXAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS:

As you think about your own story and what you bring with you into the space you are sharing, where have you seen internal tensions? How did they start or form? Have you been asked or tempted to pick a side? What do you think it felt like to be one of the men chosen in verse 5? Why do you think these people were chosen for this task?



#7 ARROWS OUT.

Acts 7 | THE STONING OF STEPHEN

Picking back up with Stephen in chapter seven, we see a man who did not have Biblical training to the degree of the religious leaders he was addressing stand in a group of people who were falsely accusing him and boldly teach about Jesus from their scriptures. If you wanted a quick synopsis of the Old Testament, this is one of a couple of summaries to be found in the New Testament. Stephen's life comes to a horrifically powerful conclusion.

When it was too much for the religious leaders to take, they revolted against the truth and lashed back, taking Stephen's life. Listen for the words Stephen uses at the end of his life – maybe they remind you of something Jesus said on the cross?

EXAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS:

What was the significance of the Old Testament story recital by Stephen? How does starting from the beginning and working through your story help to set the stage for what Jesus is at work doing in your life, here and now? Stephen's last words seem to offer forgiveness. Where in your own life would Stephen's example of forgiveness bring healing for you?



#8 IMPULSE

Acts 8 | SIMON THE SORCERER & THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

The persecution of the Church only continued. If you remember, in chapter one, the apostles were told to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth – once the Holy Spirit came on them. So far, they have stayed put in Jerusalem. In chapter 8, it seems that opposition and persecution have scattered the believers beyond Jerusalem.

Now in Samaria, we watch Philip interact with 2 different characters. One is a sorcerer who has a clunky beginning to his life of faith and the other is a wealthy Eunuch from Ethiopia. Notice how Philip interacts with each of these people. As you continue to read, you'll see that the Holy Spirit begins to speak directly to Philip and quite a powerful story plays out.

EXAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS:

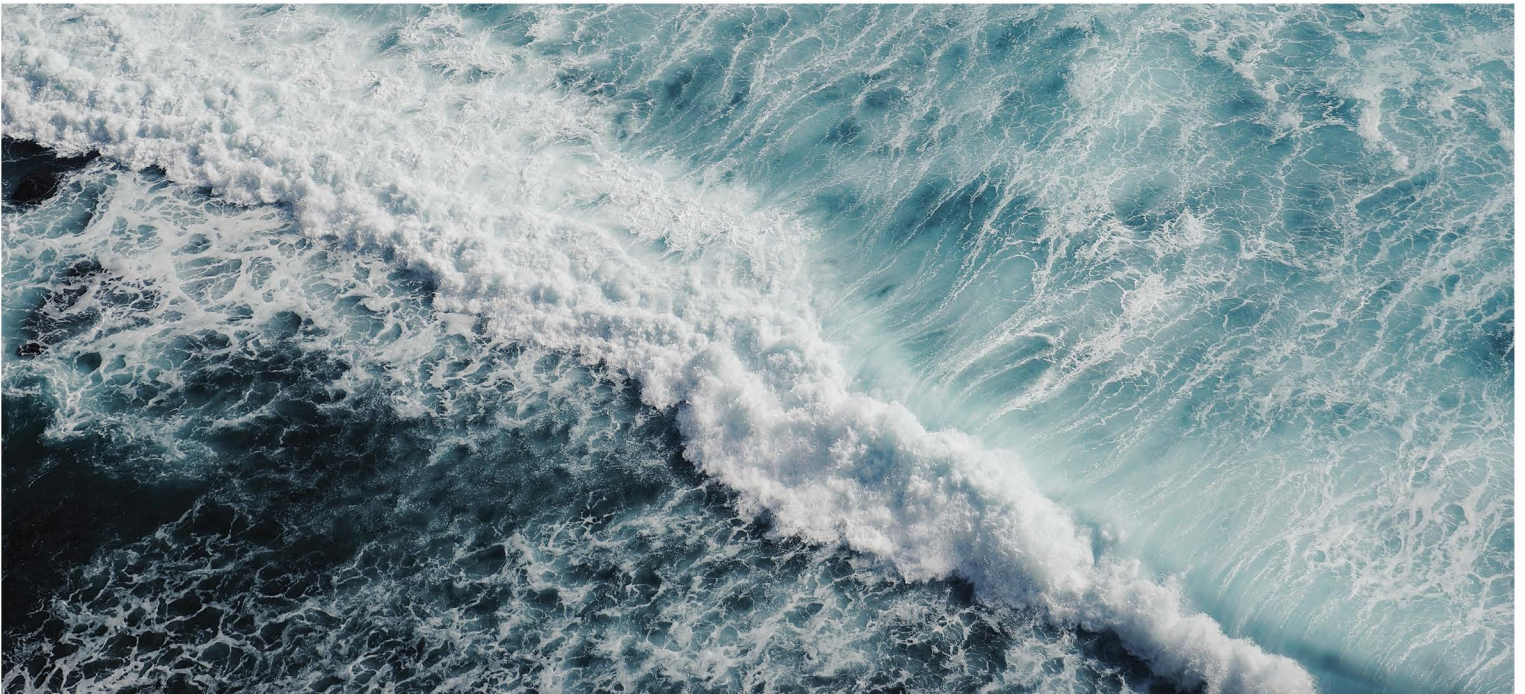
Why do you think it took persecution for the apostles to leave Jerusalem?

What do you think happened to Simon the Sorcerer after Peter told him to repent?

Put yourself in the shoes of Philip – what are you thinking after you finish baptizing the Eunuch?

What if you were the Eunuch – what is your experience like?

What do you think the Holy Spirit sounds like?





PRACTICES

Jesus' invitation, "Follow me...", gets to the active, bodily, every day and every moment nature of the life of a disciple. The goal of Jesus XP Practices is not to have you fill out worksheets and journals, but to put the ways of Jesus into practice in your everyday life.

Throughout Jesus XP you will be invited to try out and experience a variety of practices (some may call them spiritual practices or spiritual disciplines). Some may be new, while others may cause you to stretch beyond what is common and comfortable.

In the same way that you might engage in a new workout routine, don't short-cut the process. You might notice throughout Jesus XP that one or two practices really resonate and you connect to God, others and your true self. Maybe you'll consider adopting them into your regular rhythm of life.

Remember: The goal is not more knowledge but turning knowledge into love. The best life change happens as the words of Jesus move from your head to your heart through your hands.

*"You don't think your way into a new kind of living. You live your way into a new kind of thinking."
—Henri Nouwen*

PRACTICE: DAILY READING

Start your day with Jesus.
Meet with Jesus before you look at your phone
each day. Here's how:

Read a small section of scripture.
Read it slowly.
Read it three times (Head, Heart, Hands)

FIRST TIME: HEAD

As you read, ask yourself:
"What do I notice?"

SECOND TIME: HEART

As you read, ask yourself:
"What do I feel?" and
"What do the characters in the story feel?"

THIRD TIME: HANDS

As you read, ask yourself:
"What is Jesus inviting me to do?"

*This practice is adapted from a reading style
called "Lectio Divina" which means spiritual reading.
You can find out more at newlife.tv/jesusxp



PRACTICE: MISSIONAL IMPULSE

What is Jesus saying?

This is an anywhere/anytime practice.

START WITH PRAYING:

"Jesus, show me what you see."

PAY ATTENTION to the impulses that pop up . . .

Who do you think of?

Do you see someone who looks lonely?

Do you notice a need you can meet?

Do you feel drawn to show kindness?

DO what you can do:

Send a text

Stop by to see someone

Bring a gift

Give an encouraging word

Meet a need

*This might be scary at first, but it gets easier with
practice. It's important to learn the difference
between missional impulse and your own impulse.
Reading the words of Jesus will help.

PRACTICE: SHARING MEALS

Go be with people.

Jesus spent a lot of time eating with people. Meals are important to the story of Jesus and our stories. Who can you plan to share a meal with in the coming weeks?

SHARE A MEAL

Who is in your life on a regular basis? Neighbors? Friends? Invite people in your life to a meal . . . Don't like to cook? Order takeout! At school or work? Have lunch with someone new.

GO TO A MEAL

Say yes when someone new invites you to a meal. Allow yourself to be a guest at someone else's table.

THE LORD'S TABLE**

Jesus invited his followers to remember him with a special meal sometimes called communion or the Lord's Table. When you are with your friends who follow Jesus, try taking communion together this week.



**HOW TO CELEBRATE COMMUNION OR THE LORD'S TABLE

All you need is something to eat, something to drink, and some people who want to remember how good Jesus's life, death, and resurrection are to them.

This special meal is a remembrance – something followers of Jesus throughout history have done because Jesus asked us to. (You can read Luke 22:14-20 together or to prepare).

You can take communion anywhere with any food items, but Jesus used bread and wine. The bread represents Jesus's body and the cup represents Jesus's blood.

You might say to one another as you eat and drink:
This is Christ's body that was broken for you.
This is Christ's blood shed for you.

Share about your gratefulness for Jesus around your table together.

PRACTICE: GIVE GOOD AWAY

Meet real needs in practical ways

Everything good we have comes from God. How can you use what God has given you to bring good to those around you? Here are three ideas:

STUFF

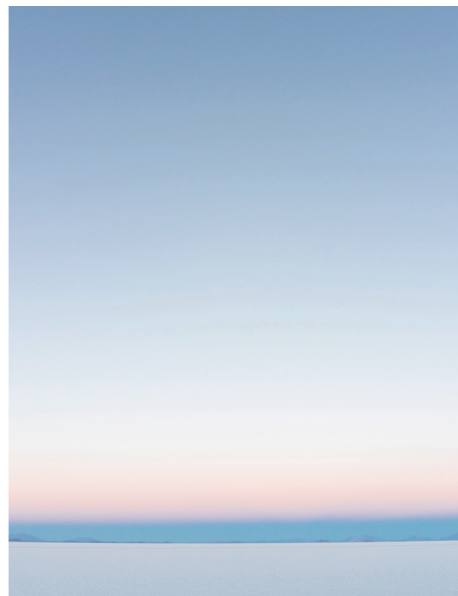
Some of us have a lot of stuff – maybe too much stuff. What if you look at the stuff you have and give the stuff you don't need to people who actually need it?

PROJECTS

With your group (or friends), think about the needs in your community. If there is way you can meet that need, do it together. EX: Clean up, support schools, serve meals . . .

MONEY

Something good happens in your heart when you are generous with your money. Is there a local church or organization you can be generous to? When you give, you'll see that good things will happen!



PRACTICE: TALK ABOUT WHAT JESUS IS DOING

How does your story connect with Jesus's story?

We all love good stories. Can you feel it? Jesus is doing something in your life. Just sharing with those around you the stuff He is already doing will invite others to notice Jesus, too.

It might help to make a list (on paper, on your phone, or to your friend) of where you've seen Jesus in the last week. Then, be ready to talk about it.

With your friends who already know Jesus . . . encourage each other with what God is up to.
With your friends who don't yet know Jesus . . . when someone asks you what you've been up to, just talk about what Jesus is doing.

You never know who might become more curious about Jesus by hearing your story. They might even join your JesusXP group.