

SERMON SERIES GUIDE  
THE BOOK OF ACTS / EASTER - PENTECOST 2026

# WHAT JESUS BEGAN

THE SPIRIT CONTINUES

NASHVILLE  
FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

# 10 STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

- Hub of Prayer and Spiritual Renewal
- Cultivating Vibrant Creative Community
- Activating our Deacons for Connection and Support
- Deep Discipleship and Biblically Focused Growth
- Enhancing our Team to Carry the Vision for Nashville
- College and Young Adult Ministry
- Faith and Work Ministry
- City Engagement
- Global Missions
- Radical Generosity

These 10 Strategic Initiatives are intended to guide our ministry goals from 2025-2035.

These are broken up into several segments with “Revive” kicking off the plan from 2024-26.



## OUR VISION:

We exist to help connect Jesus to people, people to community, and community to mission.

# TWO-YEAR (2024-2026) STRATEGIC INITIATIVES FOR “REVIVE”

Our two-year strategic ministry plan is built around a vision for spiritual renewal, deep discipleship, and community transformation. A deeply revived city requires a deeply revived church, simply a collection of deeply revived people. It starts with each of us turning and returning our entire selves to God and asking him to make us whole.

*In 2026, we are continuing to emphasize:*

- **Developing a Culture of Prayer:** *Prayer is the foundation of spiritual awakening.*
- **Building a College and Young Adult Ministry:** *We are passionate about reaching the next generation.*
- **Engaging the City:** *Our vision is to see Nashville transformed by the gospel.*
- **Equipping Our Deacons for Future Development:** *To better serve our church and city.*
- **Staffing for the Future:** *We want to ensure our staff is equipped and aligned with the church's vision and strategy.*



# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is a companion to the teaching series *What Jesus Began: The Spirit Continues*, preached at Nashville First Baptist Church from Easter to Pentecost, 2026. It is designed to work in three ways: as a personal devotional tool to be read throughout the week, as a small-group discussion resource, and as a sermon-preparation companion. You don't have to use it in all three ways — use it in the way that best serves your own engagement with Scripture this season.

Each week's entry follows the same structure. We move from observation to interpretation, reflection questions, and word studies. Every entry ends with a single question to reflect on through the week.

The guide is built around a call-and-response that runs through the entire series. The call is the series title: "What Jesus Began." The response is the declaration spoken at the close of every sermon: "The Spirit Continues." As you work through each week's entry, you will find both phrases doing specific work in the text. They are not slogans. They are a theological claim: that what Jesus inaugurated in the first century is still underway, and that the same Spirit who fell at Pentecost is the Spirit who sustains the church's witness now.

Nashville First Baptist Church is turning 206 in July of this year. This series is an invitation to understand our history not only as a heritage to preserve but as evidence of the very thing we are studying — the Spirit continuing what Jesus began in this city, through this congregation, across two centuries. You are not at the end of that story. You are somewhere in the middle of it.

**What Jesus Began. The Spirit Continues.**

# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

## **Read the Text**

An invitation to read the Scripture passage aloud and slowly before anything else. Keep this primary.

## **See the Text**

Observation questions that keep you in the passage before interpretation begins. What do you notice? Not yet: what does it mean?

## **Understand the Text**

The theological core of each week's entry. Commentary-level ideas written in accessible prose. Closes with the weekly couplet.

## **Follow the Text**

Reflection and application questions. Personal, discussable, and connected to life in Nashville, Monday through Friday.

## **Word Study**

One Greek term from the passage treated with care. A window into the text, not a vocabulary test.

## **The Question for the Week**

One question. Think on it through the week.

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# WEEK ONE - APRIL 12

## THE MISSION OF GOD

### ACTS 1:1-8

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There is a story that was underway before you were born — before your parents were born, before Nashville existed, before the nation that contains it. A story that did not begin with you and will not end with you, but that has had you in mind since its opening pages.

Most of us spend our lives inside smaller stories: the story of our family, our work, our city, our generation. Those stories are real and they matter. But they are chapters inside something far larger than any of us have fully imagined. And here is what makes that worth sitting with: you were not an afterthought to this larger story. You were always part of it. The question is not whether you belong to it. The question is whether you know it yet; and whether you are willing to live like it is true.

Nashville First Baptist Church is 205 years old this year. That is a long time by any measure. But the story this congregation has been living inside is older by several thousand years. It is the same story the first followers of Jesus found themselves caught up in on a hillside outside Jerusalem, standing open-mouthed at an empty sky, being told that what had just happened was not an ending but a beginning, and that they were about to carry it to the ends of the earth.

That is the story this series enters. You belong to it. Come and see.

### READ THE TEXT

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Read Acts 1:1-8 slowly. Don't miss that key word in verse 1: began. Then read Genesis 12:1-3 as a second lens. Notice what God promises Abraham about all peoples on earth, and hold that promise alongside what Jesus says in verse eight about the ends of the earth.

### SEE THE TEXT: OBSERVATION

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Pay close attention to what is actually in the passage before moving to interpretation. Let these questions keep you in the text.

- Luke opens Acts by addressing Theophilus, the same person he addressed in his Gospel. What does it tell you that he treats Acts as

a continuation of the same project rather than a new one?

- The word began in verse one is Luke's first word about Jesus in this second volume. What does that word imply about everything that follows, including the church, including now?
- In verse six the disciples ask whether Jesus will now restore the kingdom to Israel. What does His answer tell you about the difference between their expectations and His intentions?
- Look carefully at the geography of verse eight: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth. What is surprising about that list? What would the inclusion of Samaria signal to a Jewish audience?
- Who is the primary agent of witness in verse eight: the disciples, or someone else? What difference does that make?

## UNDERSTAND THE TEXT: INTERPRETATION

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Acts 1:1 is one of the most astonishing sentences in the New Testament. Luke says his Gospel was about everything Jesus began to do and teach. That single word – began – reframes everything that follows. The resurrection was not a conclusion. It was a transition. What Jesus did in the flesh during His earthly ministry was the opening movement of something that would continue through His Spirit in His people. The book of Acts is not primarily the story of the early church. It is the continuing story of Jesus, told through the men and women He fills and sends.

This is why the mission mandate of verse eight has such expansive geography – Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the ends of the earth. These are not simply travel destinations. They are a description of how Spirit-empowered witness moves outward against every boundary human beings erect. Placing Judea and Samaria in the same breath is deliberate. Jews and Samaritans shared centuries of mutual contempt. Jesus names them side by side in His mission geography as if that division is already obsolete. The Spirit will not honor it.

The phrase ends of the earth is not rhetoric. It is a precise echo of Isaiah 49:6, where God promises that His servant will carry salvation beyond Israel to the outermost reaches of the world. What the prophets imagined as the ultimate horizon of God's purposes, Jesus announces as the actual scope of His disciples' commission. That commission has not been completed. Nashville sits somewhere between Jerusalem and the ends of the earth, still inside the same unfinished movement.

The disciples' question in verse six "will you restore the kingdom to Israel now?" is not foolish. They are working from the right script but misreading the timeline. Jesus redirects them. Knowing the times belongs to the Father. Receiving the Spirit and bearing witness belongs to them. That same redirection still speaks to the church: less anxiety about the end, more faithfulness in the mission already given.

This is what Jesus began. We are participating in His mission: as wide as every nation, as old as Abraham, as near as our own city. The Spirit continues it.

## FOLLOW THE TEXT: APPLICATION

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These questions move from the passage into life. Take your time with each one. If you are using this guide in a Bible study, choose two or three that generate a thought-provoking conversation.

- When you think about your own life, do you experience yourself as someone inside a story or someone observing one from a distance? What would it actually feel like to move from observer to participant?
- The disciples had to wait before they could act. What does that suggest about the relationship between receiving the Spirit and moving in mission? Where might you be acting too quickly, or waiting too passively?
- Jesus names Samaria — the uncomfortable neighbor — as part of the mission. Who or what is the equivalent in your world, in your neighborhood, in this city?
- The Spirit is described in verse eight as power for witness. He is not only for personal comfort or private experience, but for testimony in the world. How does that shape your understanding of what the Spirit's presence in your life is actually for?
- Nashville First has been participating in this mission for 205 years. What does it mean to have inherited that — and what does faithfulness to it look like for you, this week, in this city?

## WORD STUDY: ĒRXATO (BEGAN)

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The Greek word translated began in Acts 1:1 is *ērxato*, the aorist form of *archō*. In Greek the aorist tense describes a completed, punctiliar action — something that happened at a definite point in time. Luke is saying: Jesus

started something. That starting is real, concrete, historically grounded. But the word began carries inherent forward momentum. You do not use began of something that has ended but for something still underway.

This is Luke's architectural signal at the very threshold of Acts. The Gospel was volume one. Acts is volume two. But by choosing this word Luke is already signaling that Acts itself will not provide a neat resolution — and sure enough, it does not. The book ends in Acts 28 with Paul preaching under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial, the story simply continuing with no formal conclusion. Many scholars have noted that this open ending is theologically deliberate. Luke leaves the story unfinished because it is unfinished. Every subsequent generation of the church — including our church, in Nashville — is meant to understand itself as living inside the same narrative, still moving toward the same horizon.

For a congregation in a season of renewed momentum, that word *ērxato* is worth meditating on. Jesus did not merely do something in the first century. He began something. And what he began has not yet reached its appointed end.

## THE QUESTION FOR THE WEEK

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God told Abraham to go before He told him where he was headed. What is the 'go' in your life that you have been waiting for more information before you begin the journey?

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# WEEK TWO - APRIL 19

## THE ASCENSION OF JESUS

### ACTS 1:1-11

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We know what it feels like when someone leaves who should have stayed. A parent who dies before their time. A mentor who moves on before you feel ready. A friend whose absence changes the shape of every room they used to occupy. Departure has a particular weight to it – not because we are ungrateful for what we had, but because what we had was so clearly not finished.

The disciples standing on the Mount of Olives in Acts 1 are experiencing exactly that. The man they have followed for three years, who died and then came back, is now leaving again. They stand there staring at an empty sky long after He has gone. Two angels have to come and tell them to stop looking up.

What is remarkable is that Jesus himself, in the days before this moment, does not frame his departure as a loss. He frames it as a gift. He tells them to wait – not because something good is ending, but because something even better is coming. The Ascension, which feels to the disciples like abandonment, is in fact the condition for everything that follows. He does not leave the mission. He expands it. He goes so that the Spirit can come – and the Spirit will go everywhere He could not.

That is the word this passage brings: sometimes the withdrawal of one form of presence is the arrival of a greater one.

### READ THE TEXT

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Read Acts 1:1-11 slowly. Notice how many times the phrase *taken up* appears, and pay attention to what the disciples ask in verse six and what Jesus does not answer. Then, read 2 Kings 2:1-14 – the account of Elijah being taken up and Elisha receiving his spirit. Hold the two accounts alongside each other before you read further.

### SEE THE TEXT: OBSERVATION

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Pay close attention to what is actually in the passage before moving to interpretation.

- Luke says in verse two that Jesus gave instructions through the Holy Spirit before He was taken up. What does it tell you that even Jesus' pre-Ascension teaching was Spirit-mediated?
- The disciples ask in verse six whether Jesus will restore the kingdom to Israel at this time. What does Jesus' answer – and what He does not answer – reveal about how God relates to our timelines?
- Jesus tells them they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. What is that power explicitly for, according to verse eight?
- Look at the geography again: Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the ends of the earth. How does this list function as a mission mandate rather than a mere prediction?
- Two men in white appear and ask why the disciples are standing there looking into the sky. What does that question imply about where their attention should now be directed?
- What is the last thing the disciples see before the cloud takes Jesus from their sight? Why might Luke include that detail?

## UNDERSTAND THE TEXT: INTERPRETATION

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For many followers of Jesus, the ascension might be the most theologically underappreciated event in the life of Jesus. Christmas draws crowds. Good Friday draws tears. Easter draws the largest gathering of the year. But the Ascension – the moment Jesus is enthroned at the right hand of the Father as Lord of all creation – sits quietly in the church calendar, observed by relatively few and understood by fewer still. Luke does not treat it like this. He gives it to us twice: at the end of his Gospel and at the opening of Acts. For Luke, the Ascension is not a footnote to the resurrection. It is the event that makes everything in Acts possible.

To understand why, we have to understand what the Ascension accomplishes. Jesus does not disappear into a vague spiritual distance. He ascends to a specific location – the right hand of the Father – where, as Psalm 110 declares, He reigns until His enemies are made a footstool. The Ascension is a coronation. The one who was crucified outside the city walls of Jerusalem is now enthroned over every city, every nation, every power that exists. When the disciples are sent to the ends of the earth in verse eight, they are not going as representatives of a marginal movement. They are going as ambassadors of the one who holds all authority in heaven and on earth.

But there is something more personal happening in this passage as well. Jesus tells the disciples to wait for the gift His Father promised: the Holy Spirit. The language is intimate. This is not a bureaucratic handover. It is the continuation of a presence by other means. Jesus does not withdraw from His people; He becomes available to His people in a new and unrestricted way. Where His physical presence was limited to one place at a time, the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh. Where the disciples could only follow Him along one road, the Spirit will lead His witnesses along every road simultaneously, to the ends of the earth.

The two men in white who appear after the Ascension do something that seems almost unkind in the moment: they interrupt the disciples' grief with a question. "Why are you standing here looking into the sky?" It is more of a reorientation than a rebuke. In a way, they're saying: the age of looking up at Jesus is over, the age of the Spirit moving through Jesus' people into the world has begun. The disciples are not meant to be sky-watchers. They are meant to be witnesses.

This is what Jesus began — not an exit, but a transfer of presence and power, so that His mission could multiply beyond what any single life could contain. The Spirit continues it.

## **FOLLOW THE TEXT: APPLICATION**

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These questions move from the passage into life. If you are using this guide with a small group, choose two or three that open the most honest conversation.

- Is there a place in your life where you are still looking up at where something used to be, rather than turning toward what God is doing now? What would it mean to be reoriented?
- Jesus tells the disciples to wait before they act. They are not ready yet, and He knows it. Where might God be asking you to receive before you go — to be filled before you pour out?
- The Spirit is given specifically as power for witness in the world. How does your daily life from Monday to Friday function as witness? What would it look like if it did so more intentionally?
- The Ascension means Jesus reigns over every sphere of life — not just the religious ones. What difference does it make that the Lord of your workplace, your neighborhood, and your city is the same Jesus who was raised and ascended?

- The disciples were told they would be witnesses in places they found deeply uncomfortable — Samaria was not on their preferred itinerary. Where is God sending you that you would rather not go?

## WORD STUDY: ANALAMBANŌ (TAKEN UP)

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The Greek verb *analambanō* appears three times in Acts 1:1–11, translated variously as taken up or received up. It is a compound of *ana* (upward) and *lambanō* (to take or receive) — a word that carries both the physical direction of the Ascension and the theological weight of reception into a new state. Jesus is not simply removed from the scene. He is received upward — welcomed into the presence of the Father, assumed into the place of authority and honor.

What makes this word theologically electric is its appearance in the *Septuagint* — the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that Luke’s educated readers would have known — in 2 Kings 2:9–11, where the same verb describes Elijah being taken up from Elisha in the whirlwind. The parallel is not accidental. Luke is writing for readers who know their Scriptures, and he is signaling that the Ascension of Jesus stands in a biblical pattern: the departure of the one who carried the Spirit, followed by the outpouring of that Spirit upon those who remain to continue the work.

Just as Elisha received a double portion of Elijah’s spirit to continue and exceed his ministry, the disciples are promised the Spirit of Jesus — not a diminished form, but the very same Spirit that rested on him, now poured out without measure. The church does not carry on without Jesus. It carries on in the power of the Spirit Jesus sends, doing the works He began and greater ones still, because He has gone to the Father.

That is the Ascension’s gift: not absence, but amplified presence.

## THE QUESTION FOR THE WEEK

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If Jesus ascended so that His presence could be more available to you through the Spirit than His physical presence ever could have been, what does that mean for how you live your everyday life?

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# WEEK THREE - APRIL 26

## THE SPIRIT OF GOD

### ACTS 2:1-13

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You have been in a room when something changed. Perhaps you cannot fully explain it — the meeting that shifted when one person walked in, the conversation that turned when someone finally said the true thing, the moment at a graveside when grief became something else without warning. Something arrived. The air was different. Whatever was happening before was no longer what was happening.

We are not very good at talking about those moments in ordinary life. We reach for inadequate words — atmosphere, energy, presence — and none of them quite fit. What we mean is that something moved into the room that had not been there before, and everything reorganized around it.

Acts 2 is the account of exactly that happening, but on a scale and with a permanence that no room has ever contained before or since. The disciples are gathered together in Jerusalem, as they were told to wait. And then the room fills with something that wind and fire can only approximate. The Spirit of God — the same Spirit that hovered over the formless deep at the beginning of all things — arrives. Not as a visitor. As an inhabitant. Not for a moment. For keeps.

Everything in the story of the Church, and everything in this series, flows from what happened on the day of Pentecost. This is the hinge. This is the week the answer to the series question becomes undeniable: what Jesus began, the Spirit continues — because the Spirit has now come to do exactly that.

### READ THE TEXT

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Read Acts 2:1-13 slowly and aloud if you can. Pay attention to the three phenomena Luke describes — sound, sight, and speech — and notice which one receives the most attention. Then sit for a moment with verse four. Everyone was filled and began to speak. And ask yourself: what does it mean that the Spirit's arrival produces speech before anything else?

## SEE THE TEXT: OBSERVATION

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Pay close attention to what is actually in the passage before moving to interpretation.

- Luke says the disciples were all together in one place when this happened. What does their unity and their waiting suggest about the conditions into which the Spirit came?
- The sound is described as like a rushing mighty wind, and the sight as tongues of fire. Why might Luke use simile — like wind, like fire — rather than saying wind and fire arrived?
- The fire distributes — one tongue resting on each of them. What does the individual distribution of what appears to be a shared phenomenon suggest about how the Spirit works?
- Verse four says they were all filled and all began to speak. Is there anyone in the room who is exempt from this? What does the universality tell you?
- The crowd that gathers hears the disciples speaking in their own native languages. What is the significance of the languages being those of the hearers rather than some new heavenly tongue?
- The crowd's response is divided — some are amazed, some mock. What does that division tell you about how the Spirit's arrival is always received?

## UNDERSTAND THE TEXT: INTERPRETATION

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Pentecost was already one of the great festivals of the Jewish calendar before Acts 2 gave it its Christian meaning. It fell fifty days after Passover — the word Pentecost comes from the Greek for fifty — and it was a feast of first fruits, a celebration of the early harvest. Jewish tradition by the first century had also come to associate Pentecost with the giving of the Law at Sinai. The timing of the Spirit's arrival at Pentecost is not accidental. Luke is telling us that what Moses received on the mountain — the Law written on stone — is now being given in a new form: the Spirit written on hearts, as Jeremiah had promised and Ezekiel had seen in vision.

The three phenomena Luke describes — sound, sight, and speech — are each doing theological work. The sound like a rushing wind recalls the Hebrew word *ruach*, which means breath, wind, and spirit simultaneously. The same word that described the Spirit hovering over the formless deep in Genesis 1 now fills a room in Jerusalem. Creation is beginning again.

The tongues of fire recall the theophany at Sinai, where God descended in fire, and the pillar of fire that led Israel through the wilderness. The same God who guided his people then is now taking up residence within his people permanently. And the speech — the bold, Spirit-empowered declaration in the languages of every nation represented in Jerusalem — announces that this presence is not for Israel alone. It never was.

The distribution of the flame is worth meditating on. One tongue resting on each of them. Not a collective experience that washes over the group anonymously, but a personal, individual encounter that is simultaneously communal. This is how the Spirit consistently works throughout Acts and throughout the New Testament — the same Spirit, distributed personally, forming a community without flattening the individuals within it.

Most remarkable of all is what the Spirit's arrival immediately produces: not silence, not rapture, not private ecstasy, but speech. Intelligible speech. Speech in the languages of the nations. The Spirit does not arrive to give the disciples a private spiritual experience. The Spirit arrives to make them witnesses: exactly as Jesus said in Acts 1:8. The power has come. The witness is already beginning. And the languages of the nations are the first sign that this witness will not stop until it reaches every corner of the earth.

This is what Jesus began: the dwelling of God within His people, and the witness of his people to the world, carried by the same Spirit who raised him from the dead. The Spirit continues it.

## **FOLLOW THE TEXT: APPLICATION**

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These questions move from the passage into life. If you are using this guide with a small group, choose two or three that open up a good conversation with one another.

The disciples received the Spirit while they were waiting obediently, not while they were busy performing. What does your own life of waiting and receptivity look like? Is there space in your week for the Spirit to fill what you bring?

The Spirit's arrival produced speech: witness, declaration, communication of the gospel across barriers. What barriers in your own life — of comfort, of fear, of unfamiliarity — is the Spirit asking you to speak across?

The crowd's response was divided: some amazed, some mocking. Have you experienced something the Spirit has done in your life that was met

with incomprehension or ridicule? How did you respond?

The Spirit rested on each of them individually. Not just the leaders. Not just the spiritually mature. All of them. Where do you most struggle to believe that the same Spirit who fell at Pentecost genuinely dwells in you?

## **WORD STUDY: APOPTHHEGGOMAI (TO SPEAK WITH INSPIRED BOLDNESS)**

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The word Luke uses in Acts 2:4 for the disciples' Spirit-empowered speech is not the ordinary Greek word for speaking. It is *apophtheggomai* — a word that appears rarely in the New Testament, used specifically for utterance that carries unusual authority, clarity, and boldness. It is the word used for oracular speech, for declarations that come from beyond the speaker. When Luke says the disciples began to *apophtheggesthai*, he is not saying they began to chat. He is saying they began to proclaim with a directness and power that was recognizably not merely their own.

The same word appears again in verse fourteen, when Peter stands up to address the crowd. He *apophtheggemai* to them — he speaks with the same Spirit-empowered authority that produced the tongues. And it appears again in Acts 26:25, when Paul defends himself before Festus and insists that what he is speaking is true and rational, not the ravings of a madman. In every case the word carries the sense of speech that is ordered, bold, intelligible, and carries something beyond what the speaker alone could produce.

This matters for how we understand the Spirit's work. *Apophtheggomai* is not *glossolalia* — not ecstatic or unintelligible utterance. It is the opposite: speech made clearer, bolder, and more penetrating by the Spirit's presence. The Spirit does not bypass the mind or the tongue. The Spirit fills them. For every follower of Jesus who has ever felt inadequate to speak of their faith, that word is worth carrying. The Spirit does not wait for eloquence. The Spirit produces it.

## **THE QUESTION FOR THE WEEK**

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If the Spirit is given as power for witness in the city you actually inhabit — Nashville, your neighborhood, your workplace — what would it look like to act this week as though that power is real and available?

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# WEEK FOUR - MAY 3

## THE FIRST SERMON

### ACTS 2:12-39

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We have all heard words that didn't land. Speeches that left the room unmoved. Arguments that were technically correct and completely inert. Persuasion that felt like pressure and produced only resistance. Most communication, even well-intentioned communication, moves across the surface of people without touching anything beneath it.

And then, rarely, something different happens. Someone speaks and the words go somewhere they we didn't anticipate they could reach. Past the irony, past the self-protection, past the carefully maintained distance you keep between yourself and anything that might require a response. You find yourself moved before you have decided to be moved. Something has been said and you know — not just intellectually but somewhere closer to the center of you — that it is true. And the fact that it is true is going to cost you something.

That is what happens in Acts 2:37. Peter has preached for the better part of what Luke records in twenty-seven verses, and the crowd — thousands of people gathered in Jerusalem for the festival — is cut to the heart. Not entertained. Not impressed. Cut. Something has gone in. And the question they immediately ask, "What shall we do?" is not the question of people evaluating an argument. It is the question of people who have been confronted with a reality they cannot step around.

This is the first Christian sermon ever preached. And it is a masterclass in what happens when the Spirit-filled Word goes out and does what no technique can manufacture.

### READ THE TEXT

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Read Acts 2:12-39 slowly. Notice that Peter begins not with Jesus but with the crowd's own question — *what does this mean?* He is answering them on their own terms before he introduces anything new. Then notice the structure of his argument: he quotes Scripture, interprets it, and applies it to Jesus — three times. Pay attention to which Scriptures he chooses and what each one establishes.

## SEE THE TEXT: OBSERVATION

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Pay close attention to what is actually in the passage before moving to interpretation.

- Peter begins by addressing the crowd's question and their mockery directly. What does it tell you about his posture as a preacher that he starts where they are rather than where he wants to be?
- Peter quotes Joel 2:28–32. What does the Joel passage promise, and how does Peter say that promise has just been fulfilled?
- Peter says Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, and yet also that the crowd crucified him by the hands of lawless men. How does Peter hold both God's sovereignty and human responsibility together in the same sentence?
- Peter quotes Psalm 16 and argues that David could not have been writing about himself. What is the logic of his argument, and why does he need to establish that David's tomb is still with them?
- What does Peter quote from Psalm 110, and what does it establish about where Jesus is now and what he is doing?
- Verse 37 says the crowd was cut to the heart and asked what they should do. What in Peter's sermon produced that response — the argument, the Scripture, the Spirit, or all three together?
- What does Peter offer them in verses 38–39, and who does he say the promise is for?

## UNDERSTAND THE TEXT: INTERPRETATION

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Peter's sermon is not a display of rhetorical virtuosity. It is a man standing up and explaining what the crowd has just witnessed. This is the posture Luke establishes before Peter says a single word: he stands up and raises his voice and addresses them. That raising of the voice is not volume for its own sake. It is the act of a witness — someone with something to testify to, in public, at personal cost. Three weeks ago this same man was denying in a courtyard that he even knew Jesus. This is practical evidence that Peter's encounter with the Holy Spirit had changed him.

The structure of the sermon is a cumulative biblical argument in three movements. First, Peter addresses the phenomenon of Pentecost itself: this is not drunkenness, he says, it is what Joel promised — the Spirit poured out on all flesh in the last days. He grounds the strange and disori-

enting event the crowd has just witnessed in Scripture, which is the most stabilizing thing a preacher can do. He is saying: you are not watching something random. You are watching something ancient finally arriving.

Then he turns to Jesus — not as a detour but as the destination toward which Joel was always pointing. He establishes three facts about Jesus in rapid succession: He was attested by God through miracles, He was crucified according to the definite plan of God, and He was raised by God because death could not hold him. Each fact is stated without apology and without softening. Peter is not managing the crowd's response. He is trusting the truth to do its own work.

The Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 arguments are where the sermon reaches its theological heights. Peter reads Psalm 16 — you will not abandon my soul to Hades or let your Holy One see corruption — and makes the remarkable claim that David, who did die and whose tomb is present with them, could not have been writing about himself. He was writing prophetically about his greater descendant. David saw the resurrection coming. He wrote it down. And now it has happened, and they are standing in the middle of the evidence.

Psalm 110 completes the argument. David calls his own descendant Lord — which means this descendant must be more than a human heir. He is seated at the right hand of God. He has received the promised Spirit. And He has poured it out on the very crowd now standing, bewildered and convicted, in Jerusalem. Every element of the sermon lands in the same place: this Jesus, whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ.

The crowd's response is the only possible response to a sermon that has been fully heard. They are not applauding. They are not debating. They are asking what to do next. The Word has done what the Spirit sent it to do.

This is what Jesus began — the proclamation of His own Lordship through the mouths of His Spirit-filled people, to the ends of the earth. The Spirit continues it.

## **FOLLOW THE TEXT: APPLICATION**

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These questions move from the passage into life. If you are using this guide with a small group, choose two or three questions that create an engaging conversation.

- Peter preaches a sermon that is almost entirely Scripture quoted and interpreted. What does it tell you about how seriously he had

read and internalized his Bible before he ever stood up to speak? What does that suggest about your own relationship with Scripture?

- Peter holds together God's sovereignty and human responsibility without resolving the tension. Where in your own life are you tempted to collapse that tension in one direction — either overemphasizing God's control in a way that removes your responsibility, or overemphasizing your choices in a way that forgets God's governance?
- The crowd was cut to the heart not by a clever argument but by a true one, delivered in the power of the Spirit. Where do you most need the Spirit to do that work in you: to get past the surface of you and reach something that actually needs to respond?
- Peter's offer in verses 38–39 is extraordinarily inclusive: the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far off. Who in your life feels far off from God? How does Peter's offer here reframe how you might pray for or speak to them?

## WORD STUDY: KATANYSSŌ (CUT TO THE HEART)

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The Greek verb *katanyssō* appears exactly once in the entire New Testament, here in Acts 2:37. It is translated cut to the heart in most English versions, and the translation is doing its best with a word that carries physical force. The root *nyssō* means to prick, pierce, or stab. The prefix *kata* intensifies the action — this is not a graze but a penetration. Something has gone in. The image is of a blade finding its way through armor.

In the *Septuagint* — the Greek Old Testament Luke would have known — *katanyssō* and its cognates appear in contexts of sudden, stunning grief or spiritual shock. In Genesis 45, when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, they are struck speechless — the word carries a sense of being overwhelmed by a reality one was not prepared to encounter. In Psalm 109 it describes the kind of anguish that arises when the truth of one's situation becomes undeniable.

What Luke is describing in Acts 2:37 is therefore not intellectual persuasion, though persuasion is present. It is not emotional manipulation, though emotion is present. It is the Word of God doing what Hebrews 4:12 will later describe with similar language — piercing to the division of soul and spirit, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. The crowd is not charmed. They are reached. Something in Peter's



# WEEK FIVE - MAY 10

## THE FIRST CHURCH

### ACTS 2:40-47

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Most of us have experienced groups that looked like community but weren't. The small group that met weekly and never knew each other. The church that was friendly on Sunday and absent on Tuesday. The neighborhood that waved from driveways and never once sat at a common table. Proximity is not community. Familiarity is not community. Even shared belief, held privately and practiced separately, is not community.

But most of us have also experienced something that actually was. A group that knew you were missing before you told them. People who showed up without being asked. A table where honesty was possible and nobody performed. A shared life that was recognizably more than the sum of its individual parts. When you have experienced that, even briefly, you know that what most gatherings offer is an imitation. And you know you want the real thing.

Acts 2:42-47 describes the real thing; it is the first portrait of the Christian community. This text reveals not an idealized vision or a set of aspirations, but a description of what actually happened when the Spirit of God took up residence in a group of people who had been told to wait together and had just watched three thousand more join them in a single morning. What they became is not the product of good programming or excellent leadership, though leadership is present. It is the product of a common life reorganized from the inside out by the Spirit who now dwells within them.

This is what community looks like when it is not manufactured. This is what the church was always meant to be.

### READ THE TEXT

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Read Acts 2:40-47. Notice the four things in verse 42 that the community devoted itself to, and hold them in mind as you read the rest of the passage. Then notice Who is doing the adding in verse 47. Pay attention to whether the growth described here is the result of the community's effort or something else.

## SEE THE TEXT: OBSERVATION

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Pay close attention to what is actually in the passage before moving to interpretation.

- Verse 40 says Peter warned and pleaded with the crowd before three thousand were added. What does the language of warning and pleading suggest about the seriousness of the response Peter was asking for?
- Verse 42 lists four things the community devoted themselves to – teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. What is the relationship between these four things? Are they separate activities or aspects of one common life?
- Luke says many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. How does the continuation of miraculous works connect to what we saw in the earlier weeks of this series?
- Verses 44–45 describe the community holding possessions in common and selling property to give to those in need. How does the community's economic practice relate to its spiritual life? What produced what?
- Verse 46 says they attended the temple together and broke bread in their homes. They are operating publicly and privately. What does the combination of those two spaces suggest about the shape of their common life?
- Who adds to the church in verse 47 – the community, or someone else? What difference does the grammar of that sentence make to how we understand church growth?

## UNDERSTAND THE TEXT: INTERPRETATION

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Acts 2:42 is one of the most compressed sentences in the New Testament. In thirty-five words Luke describes the entire structural life of the earliest Christian community: they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Every word is doing work. But the word that governs them all is *devoted*. This word carries the sense of persistent, stubborn, active commitment. These four things were not the early church's occasional practices. They were its continuous posture. They kept showing up to them. Repeatedly. Together.

The four elements themselves deserve attention because they are not four separate programs running in parallel. They are four dimensions of

a single common life. The apostles' teaching — the authoritative witness to what Jesus said and did and meant — shapes the community's understanding of who they are and what they are for.

Fellowship, *koinonia* in Greek, is not mere sociability but genuine participation in a shared life — the word carries economic and covenantal weight as well as relational warmth. Breaking of bread points both to the regular shared meals of the community and to the Lord's Supper at their center — the practice that continually re-narrates the community's identity around Jesus' death and resurrection. And prayer is the community's ongoing, corporate orientation toward the God whose Spirit now dwells within them.

What Luke describes in verses 43–47 is what happens when a community actually lives that way. Signs and wonders continue through the apostles. Possessions are shared freely with anyone in need. The community gathers daily — in the temple courts for public worship and in homes for intimate fellowship and eucharistic meals. And people notice. People outside the community watch what is happening and find it striking enough to call worthy of praise. The community's common life is itself a form of witness.

The most theologically important sentence in the passage is easily overlooked because it is the last one. The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Not the church added. Not the apostles added. The Lord added. This matters enormously for how we understand the relationship between the community's life and the church's growth. Luke does not want us to conclude that radical sharing and devoted common life are strategies for church growth. They are not strategies at all. They are the natural outworking of a community formed by the Spirit, and it is the Lord who brings others into that community as and when He chooses. The church's calling is faithfulness to its common life. The growth belongs to God.

This is what Jesus began — a community of shared life, mutual care, and Spirit-formed devotion, through which the Lord draws people toward Himself. The Spirit continues it.

## **FOLLOW THE TEXT: APPLICATION**

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These questions move from the passage into life. If you are using this guide with a small group, choose two or three that stir up a good conversation.

- The economic sharing of verses 44–45 is striking and often made to seem exceptional or culturally specific. But the principle beneath it — that what I have is available to those who need it — is not exceptional. Where in your life does that principle actually govern your relationship to your possessions? Where does it not?
- The community met in the temple courts and in homes — public and domestic spaces. Do you have both? A community of public worship and a smaller, more intimate community where you are actually known? What would it look like to pursue whichever you are lacking?
- Luke says the community enjoyed the favor of all the people. Their common life was winsome — it made people outside want to come closer. Does your experience of Christian community feel like something others would find attractive? If not, what is the gap between what you have and what Acts 2 describes?
- The Lord added to their number. Not the church, not the programs, not the outreach strategy — the Lord. What does it do to your sense of responsibility for NFBC's growth to locate the agency of growth where Luke locates it?

## WORD STUDY: PROSKARTEROUNTES (DEVOTED THEMSELVES)

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The Greek participle *proskarterountes*, translated devoted themselves in verse 42, comes from the verb *proskartereō* — a compound of *pros* (toward, in the direction of) and *kartereō* (to be strong, to hold fast, to endure). Together they form a word that means to persist in or toward something with stubborn, active tenacity. It is the word used in military contexts for a soldier who will not leave his post. It appears elsewhere in the New Testament for the disciples who constantly attended to Jesus during His ministry, for Paul's instruction to devote yourself to prayer in Romans 12:12, and for the early community's continuous presence together in Acts 1:14 while they waited for the Spirit.

What *proskarterountes* rules out is the idea that the early church's common life was the product of enthusiasm or novelty. Communities fueled by excitement do not need a word this strong to describe them. The word Luke chooses suggests that showing up to the teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayer required something more durable than feeling. It required decision, commitment, and the kind of will that keeps coming back when the novelty has worn off.



# WEEK SIX - MAY 17

## THE FIRST MIRACLE

ACTS 3:2-8; 13-23

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There is a particular kind of invisibility that comes not from being hidden but from being seen too many times. The person who sits in the same spot every day becomes part of the scenery. The beggar at the corner who has been there long enough that people have stopped registering him as a person. The colleague who has been struggling for so long that the office has adjusted to the awkwardness. The family member whose pain has become so familiar that the family has learned to work around it rather than addressing it directly.

Invisibility through repetition is one of the most hurtful cruelties of human community. We do not intend it. Yet the person who needed our full attention yesterday needs it again today, and we have already decided what that need looks like and how much of ourselves it will cost us, and we walk past.

The man at the Beautiful Gate has been carried to that spot every day of his adult life. Forty years or more of being set down at the entrance to the most trafficked religious site in Jerusalem and asking for what people could spare as they passed through to worship. He has been seen thousands of times. So it seems.

Peter and John stop. And before anything miraculous happens, Peter does something that is itself a kind of miracle in the world this man inhabits. He looks at him. Fully. On purpose. As a person whose face is worth learning. What follows is what always follows when the Spirit of Jesus directs His people's attention toward the ones the world has learned to walk past.

### READ THE TEXT

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Read Acts 3:2-8, paying attention to the sequence of actions in verses 6-8. Notice the command, the physical touch, the immediate response, and what the man does first when he enters the temple. Then read Acts 3:13-23, which is Peter's sermon interpreting the miracle to the crowd that gathers. Notice how Peter refuses to let the crowd make the miracle about him or John, and where he insists the power actually came from.

## SEE THE TEXT: OBSERVATION

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Pay close attention to what is actually in the passage before moving to interpretation.

- The man is described as lame from birth and over forty years old elsewhere in the chapter. He is not recently injured. This is a life-long condition. Why does Luke include that detail, and what does it add to the weight of what happens?
- The man asks Peter and John for money. He has a specific and practical expectation. What does Peter's response of "silver and gold I do not have" establish before the miracle itself?
- Peter takes the man by the right hand and raises him up. The healing is not simply verbal for it also involves physical contact. What does that physical dimension of the healing suggest about how the Spirit works through embodied, present people?
- The man's first act after being healed is to enter the temple — the place he had been carried to the gate of every day but never entered. What does that detail communicate about the nature of the restoration he has received?
- In verses 13–16, Peter makes a careful argument about where the power came from. Who does he name, and who does he pointedly say it did not come from?
- Peter quotes Moses in verse 22: the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me. What does applying that prophecy to Jesus claim about who Jesus is?

## UNDERSTAND THE TEXT: INTERPRETATION

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The Beautiful Gate was one of the great entrances to the temple complex in Jerusalem. It was likely the Nicanor Gate on the eastern side, described by ancient sources as magnificent, possibly clad in Corinthian bronze. It was the gate through which worshipers passed to enter the Court of Women and then the inner courts of the temple. To be set down at the Beautiful Gate every day was to be placed at the threshold of the holy — close enough to hear, visible to everyone entering to worship — and yet permanently excluded from entry. Lame and physically imperfect, the man was barred by Levitical law from passing through. Every day he was carried to the most beautiful entrance of the house of God and could go no further.

Peter and John are on their way to the afternoon hour of prayer. It's three in the afternoon, one of the fixed prayer times of the Jewish day. They are observant Jews in the earliest days of the church, still participating in the rhythms of temple worship. What interrupts their routine is not a program or a plan but a person. And what Luke records before anything miraculous occurs is the act of attention: Peter fastened his eyes on him, as did John, and Peter said, look at us.

The command to look at them is striking. The man has learned not to make eye contact. Beggars quickly discover that eye contact makes people uncomfortable and reduces what they give. Peter is interrupting a learned pattern of mutual invisibility and insisting on genuine encounter. Look at us. We see you. What follows from that seeing is the miracle. But the seeing is where it begins.

Peter's words in verse six are among the most quoted in Acts: "Silver and gold I have none, but what I do have I give you — in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." The contrast between what Peter does not have and what he does have is the theological heart of the passage. The church at its beginning has no financial resources, no political power, no institutional standing. What it has is the name of Jesus — which is not a formula but a person, specifically the risen, ascended, glorified person of Jesus whose Spirit now fills His people. What Peter gives the man is not his own power but an access point to a power that has taken up residence in him.

Peter's sermon to the gathering crowd refuses to let the miracle be misread. He deflects the crowd's amazement away from himself and John immediately: why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made this man walk? He will not accept the credit and he will not leave the credit ambiguous. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has glorified His servant Jesus. The name of Jesus — faith in His name — has made this man strong. The miracle is not a demonstration of apostolic power. It is a demonstration of the ongoing, present, active Lordship of Jesus over the bodies and lives of those His people encounter in His name.

This is what Jesus began — a mission in which His people encounter the broken, the overlooked, and the excluded, and in his name offer what no financial resource can provide. The Spirit continues it.

## FOLLOW THE TEXT: APPLICATION

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These questions move from the passage into life. If you are using this guide with a small group, choose two or three that open the most honest conversation.

- Peter saw the man fully before he did anything for him. Who in your regular environment have you been walking past long enough that you have stopped truly seeing them? What would it mean to stop and look at them the way Peter looked at this man?
- Peter gave what he had rather than apologizing for what he lacked. What do you actually have – in terms of presence, skill, faith, resource, time – that you could give to someone who needs it this week? What stops you from giving it?
- The man was healed and immediately went into the temple – the place he had been excluded from his whole life. Is there a space or a community or a practice from which you have felt excluded or disqualified? What would it mean to believe that Jesus' restoration of you extends that far?
- Peter says the power came from the name of Jesus – from faith in that name – not from his own piety or power. Where are you tempted to rely on your own spiritual resources rather than on the name and person of Jesus? What would it look like to make that distinction more deliberately?

## WORD STUDY – ATENISAS (LOOKED INTENTLY)

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The Greek participle *atenisas*, from the verb *atenizō*, appears ten times in the New Testament – eight of them in Luke-Acts. It describes a specific kind of looking: deliberate, sustained, fixed, intent. It is not a glance. It is not ordinary visual attention. It is the kind of looking you do when you have decided that what you are looking at matters and you are going to give it your full self.

Luke uses *atenizō* at moments of particular spiritual significance throughout Acts. The disciples look intently into the sky as Jesus is taken up in chapter one. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looks intently into heaven and sees the glory of God in chapter seven. Paul looks intently at the Sanhedrin before he speaks in Acts 23. In each case the word marks a moment of Spirit-directed vision – seeing something that ordinary, distracted attention would miss.



# WEEK SEVEN - MAY 24

## THE MESS OF MINISTRY

### ACTS 6:1-7

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There is a particular kind of pain that only comes from loving something. You cannot be hurt by an institution you never believed in. You cannot be disappointed by a community you never invested in. The wound requires prior attachment. It requires that you gave something — your time, your hope, your trust, your labor.

Most people who have walked away from a church did not leave because they stopped believing in God. They left because they stopped believing that this particular community of people who claimed to follow God was capable of being what it said it was. They experienced the gap between the proclamation and the practice, between the vision and the reality, between what the church preached about love and what it actually did when love was costly and inconvenient. And the gap was wide enough to walk out through.

Acts 6 is the earliest recorded moment of that gap appearing in the Christian community and it appears within weeks of Pentecost. The same community that devoted itself to fellowship and held all things in common and enjoyed the favor of all the people now has a complaint lodged against it. People are being overlooked. The Hellenist widows — Jewish Christians from Greek-speaking backgrounds, already a minority voice in a community shaped by Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Jews — are being missed in the daily distribution of food. Nobody intended it. Nobody planned to exclude them. The community simply grew faster than its structures could handle, and in the gap between the growth and the structures, the most vulnerable fell through.

This is what ministry looks like from the inside. Not consistently glorious. Not perpetually inspiring. Real, complicated, human, and — if handled humbly and honestly — the place where the mission gets refined rather than abandoned.

## READ THE TEXT

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Read Acts 6:1–7. Notice the sequence: the problem is named, the twelve gather the community together, a solution is proposed that involves distributing responsibility rather than centralizing it further, the community chooses the seven, the apostles pray and lay hands on them, and the Word of God spreads. Pay attention to what happens to the mission at the end of the passage. Then read Acts 15:36–41 as a companion text – a later moment of conflict in the same community, at a different scale, with a different resolution.

## SEE THE TEXT: OBSERVATION

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Pay close attention to what is actually in the passage...

- The complaint arises as the disciples were increasing in number. Why is it significant that the crisis emerges precisely at a moment of growth rather than a moment of stagnation?
- The Hellenist widows are the ones being overlooked. Who are the Hellenists, and what does their position as a linguistic and cultural minority within the community suggest about how quickly even Spirit-filled communities can reproduce the patterns of the world around them?
- The twelve apostles say it is not right that they should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables. This sounds like a hierarchy of tasks, but read it carefully – are they saying serving tables is unimportant, or are they saying this particular task belongs to others so they can do their particular task?
- The seven men chosen all have Greek names. What does that suggest about how the community addressed the complaint – did they merely add a process, or did they give the overlooked community genuine ownership and voice?
- The apostles pray and lay hands on the seven. What does that act communicate about the status of the work the seven are entrusted with?
- Verse 7 says the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly. What is the relationship between resolving the internal mess and the acceleration of the external mission?

## UNDERSTAND THE TEXT: INTERPRETATION

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Acts 6:1 is the first recorded internal conflict in the history of the Christian church. Luke does not hide it. He does not explain it away or soften its edges. He simply states it: a complaint arose. The Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews. Real people, in a real community, with a real grievance. And the grievance was legitimate because the widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. The community that had, weeks earlier, been distributing to anyone who had need had grown quickly enough that its practice could no longer keep up with its principle.

This is the ordinary rhythm of institutional life, and it is worth naming plainly because the church has often been reluctant to name it. Communities outgrow their structures. What worked when there were a hundred people does not work when there are five thousand. What was personal and spontaneous at small scale becomes systematized and bureaucratic at large scale. The Hellenist widows fell through not because anyone in the community despised them but because the community had not yet built the structures and systems required to honor its own commitments at the scale it had now reached.

The apostles' response is a model of wise, Spirit-directed leadership under pressure. They do not become defensive. They do not minimize the complaint. They do not simply work harder at the existing approach, which would have produced the same results more exhaustingly. They call the community together, name the problem honestly, and propose a structural solution: identify seven people of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, to take responsibility for this work so that the twelve can focus on prayer and the ministry of the word. The solution is not centralization but distribution: not the leaders doing more, but more leaders doing their own distinct work well.

The choice of seven men with Greek names is the detail that confirms the solution was genuine rather than quick-fix or cosmetic. The community did not merely add an administrative layer. It gave the overlooked community genuine voice and ownership. The ones who had been missed now had seven of their own people managing the work that had missed them. This is the difference between a process improvement and an act of justice – and the early church, guided by the Spirit, chose the latter.

The illustration from Acts 15 adds a dimension to the passage that keeps it from being too tidy. Even after the church has learned to handle internal

structural conflict wisely, the personal conflicts do not go away. Paul and Barnabas — the two men the Spirit specifically set apart for the missionary journey in Acts 13 — come to such a sharp disagreement over whether to take John Mark that they part ways. Permanently. Two of the greatest figures in the early mission, formed by the same Spirit, committed to the same Lord, separated by a dispute they could not resolve together. Luke records it without editorializing. He does not tell us who was right. He tells us what happened: they separated, and two missionary journeys went out instead of one. The mess does not stop the mission.

This is what Jesus began — a community that is genuinely human, genuinely Spirit-filled, and perpetually in need of the grace it proclaims to others. The Spirit continues it — even through this.

## **FOLLOW THE TEXT: APPLICATION**

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These questions move from the passage into life. If you are using this guide with a small group, choose two or three that open the most honest conversation.

- The Hellenist widows were overlooked not out of malice but out of structural failure in a rapidly growing community. Who in your community — your church, your workplace, your neighborhood — might be falling through the gaps of a structure that has outgrown its own capacity to care? What would it take to see them?
- The seven chosen were full of the Spirit and wisdom. The crisis required both — spiritual attentiveness and practical competence. Where do you tend to separate those two things, treating them as if they belong to different domains of life?
- The Paul-and-Barnabas conflict in Acts 15 ended without resolution — they simply separated. Have you experienced a conflict in Christian community that did not resolve neatly? How did you hold together your faith in the Spirit's presence with the reality of the unresolved mess?
- Acts 6:7 places the acceleration of the mission directly after the resolution of the internal conflict. What internal tensions or structural failures in your own circles, if addressed honestly, might free the mission to move more freely?

## WORD STUDY – GOGGYSMOS (COMPLAINT, MURMURING)

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The Greek noun *goggysmos*, translated complaint in verse 1, may be one of the most theologically charged words Luke could have chosen for what happens at the opening of Acts 6. In ordinary Greek it means a murmuring or grumbling; the low sound of discontent spreading through a group. But in the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that Luke’s educated readers would have known intimately – *goggysmos* and its related verb *gongyzo* are the specific words used for Israel’s murmuring in the wilderness against Moses and Aaron.

In Exodus 16, the people grumble about the lack of food and God provides manna. In Numbers 14, they grumble about the difficulty of entering the promised land and God responds with judgment. In Numbers 16, they grumble against Moses’ leadership and the earth opens. The *goggysmos* of the wilderness generation is one of the defining failures of the Exodus story – the inability of a liberated people to trust God’s provision and leadership through difficulty. It is so prominent in the tradition that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10, warns the church not to grumble as some of them did and were destroyed.

Luke’s use of *goggysmos* in Acts 6:1 is therefore not casual. He is placing the early church’s complaint in that same scriptural register – which means he is also, implicitly, placing the apostles’ response in the register of Moses. Just as Moses was called to lead a murmuring community through the wilderness without abandoning the mission, the twelve are called to address the complaint without abandoning their own calling to prayer and the word. And just as the wisest counsel Moses ever received came from his father-in-law Jethro – who told him he could not carry the leadership alone and needed to distribute it – the wisest response of the twelve is to distribute the responsibility to seven people of good repute.

The echo does not flatten the differences between the situations. But it does something important: it normalizes the mess. Communities of God’s people have been murmuring since Sinai. The question has never been whether the complaint will arise. It has always been whether the leaders will respond with wisdom, humility, and genuine structural change – or whether they will become defensive and miss the Spirit’s invitation to build something better.



# WEEK EIGHT - MAY 31

## THE SENDING OF THE CHURCH

### ACTS 13:1-4

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Most of the moments that change everything do not feel, in the moment, like they are changing everything.

The meeting where someone says the thing that reorients a whole organization rarely announces itself as that meeting. The conversation that becomes the beginning of a marriage or a friendship or a vocation rarely begins with any sense of its own weight. The morning that turns out to be the first morning of a completely different life looks, from the inside, like an ordinary morning.

The church at Antioch was not holding a strategy summit. They were not running a visioning process or consulting a growth consultant. They were worshipping. They were fasting. They were doing what they had always done — gathering in the presence of God, orienting themselves toward Him, waiting on Him together with hungry, open, and attentive hearts. It was, by the visible evidence, an ordinary gathering of an extraordinary community.

And then the Spirit spoke: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

Nobody in that room knew they were about to commission the Gentile missionary movement that would carry the gospel from Antioch to Athens to Rome and eventually, across two thousand years, to every nation on earth. This gospel eventually landed in America and our city of Nashville as a result of this moment. What happened next began in a prayer meeting. It always does.

### READ THE TEXT

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Read Acts 13:1-4. Four verses. Let the brevity of the passage and the enormity of what it sets in motion sit together. Notice that the Holy Spirit spoke, not the leadership team, not a governance committee, not the most visionary person in the room. Now read Acts 1:8 again alongside it.

## SEE THE TEXT: OBSERVATION

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Pay close attention to what is actually in the passage before moving to interpretation.

- The passage opens by naming the prophets and teachers at Antioch. The list is striking — it includes names that suggest Jewish, African, and Roman backgrounds. What does the demographic diversity of the leadership community at Antioch suggest about the kind of church that is ready to send?
- The church is worshiping and fasting when the Spirit speaks. Why does Luke establish that context before recording the Spirit's words? What does it tell you about the conditions in which the Spirit's direction tends to come?
- The Spirit says set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. The Spirit does not explain or justify the instruction. What does the absence of explanation tell you about the kind of trust the Spirit's direction requires?
- After fasting and praying, the church lays hands on them and sends them off. What is the significance of the church's act of sending alongside the Spirit's act of calling? Who ultimately commissions Barnabas and Saul?
- Verse four says they were sent out by the Holy Spirit. One verse earlier the church sent them off. How do both statements hold together — and what does it tell you about the relationship between the Spirit's sending and the church's sending?
- This passage is the launching of the great Gentile mission. Everything that follows in Acts — the journeys, the churches, the letters, the imprisonment, the arrival in Rome — traces back to this room, this prayer meeting, this Spirit-directed moment. What does it say about God's purposes that something this significant began in an act of communal prayer rather than an act of strategic planning?

## UNDERSTAND THE TEXT: INTERPRETATION

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The church at Antioch is one of the most significant communities in the entire New Testament, and it is worth pausing to understand what kind of church it was before we understand what it did. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire — a cosmopolitan, diverse, complex urban centre. The church there reflected its city. Its leadership included

Barnabas from Cyprus, Simeon called Niger — almost certainly a man of African descent, the name Niger meaning black — Lucius of Cyrene from North Africa, Manaen who had grown up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul of Tarsus. Five leaders, at least three continents represented, an extraordinary range of social backgrounds. This is the community the Spirit chooses to launch the Gentile mission. Not the Jerusalem church, with its apostolic prestige. Not a community of uniform background and culture. A diverse, worshiping, fasting community in a cosmopolitan city — exactly the kind of community whose witness could reach a cosmopolitan world.

The Spirit's instruction in verse two is arresting in its directness and its brevity: set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. There is no elaboration. No ten-point plan. No timeline or budget. The Spirit names two people and a direction and leaves the rest to obedience and faith. This is consistently how the Spirit operates throughout Acts — specific enough to be followed, open enough to require trust. The work to which I have called them is not described because the Spirit is not asking the church to evaluate a proposal. The Spirit is asking the church to release what belongs to him.

The double sending of verse three and verse four is one of the most theologically rich moments in the entire book. The church fasts and prays, lays hands on Barnabas and Saul, and sends them off. Then immediately Luke says they were sent out by the Holy Spirit. Both are true. Both are necessary. The Spirit calls and commissions; the church confirms and releases. This is the pattern of Christian mission in Acts — always simultaneously divine in its origin and ecclesial in its expression. The Spirit does not bypass the community of faith to send workers into the harvest. The Spirit works through the community's worship, discernment, prayer, and willingness to release the people it would most naturally want to keep.

What Barnabas and Saul go out to do will eventually change the shape of the entire known world. The letters Paul writes on those journeys will become the epistles of the New Testament. The churches he plants will carry the gospel to Rome and beyond. And it all begins here with a community gathered in worship, a Spirit who speaks into the gathered silence, and a church willing to open its hands and let go of its best.

This is what Jesus began — a sending movement, Spirit-launched and church-carried, that has not stopped and will not stop until every nation has heard. The Spirit continues it — through us, from here, into Nashville and the ends of the earth.

## FOLLOW THE TEXT: APPLICATION

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These questions move from the passage into life. If you are using this guide with a small group, choose two or three that open the most honest conversation.

- The church at Antioch released its two best people. Barnabas and Saul were not spare capacity — they were central to the community's life and leadership. Where are you holding on to something or someone that the Spirit may be asking you to release for the mission?
- The Spirit “says set apart for me” — the mission belongs to God before it belongs to the church or its leaders. Where are you tempted to treat the mission as yours — to manage it, control it, take credit for it — rather than holding it as something that belongs to the Spirit who launched it?
- You don't worship just to worship. The Antioch church's gathered worship produced a missionary movement that reached the ends of the earth. What might your gathered worship at Nashville First be producing that you cannot yet see? What would it mean to worship with that kind of expectation?
- This series began with the question *What Jesus Began*. Eight weeks later, having moved through the Spirit's arrival, the first sermon, the first church, the first miracle, the mess of ministry, and now the sending — what is your answer? What did Jesus begin, and what does it mean that the Spirit is continuing it through you, in this city, in this moment?

## WORD STUDY: APHORISATE (SET APART)

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The Greek verb *aphorizō*, from which the aorist imperative *aphorisate* comes, means to mark off by a boundary, to separate, to set apart for a distinct purpose. It appears in the New Testament in a range of contexts: Paul uses it of his own calling in Romans 1:1, describing himself as set apart for the gospel of God — using the same word the Spirit uses here in Acts 13:2. In Galatians 1:15, Paul says God set him apart before he was born and called him through His grace. The word carries the weight of a divine prior claim — before Barnabas and Saul were set apart by the church, they had been set apart by God.

The root of *aphorizō* is the same root from which the word Pharisee derives — one who is separated. The Pharisaic movement understood itself as a community of separation, marked off from the contaminating influences of the Gentile world in order to maintain the purity of Israel. The separation ran inward and upward — away from people, toward the Law.

The separation the Spirit announces in Acts 13:2 runs in the precisely opposite direction. Barnabas and Saul are not set apart from the world. They are set apart into it — sent out through it, toward the ends of it. The boundary the Spirit draws around them is not a wall of protection but a commissioning line. You belong to the mission. You are marked for it. Go.

This is the theology of Christian vocation compressed into a single word. To be set apart by the Spirit is not to be removed from ordinary life into religious space. It is to be claimed by the God whose mission runs through every space — marketplace and household, city and countryside, synagogue and Areopagus — and sent out with the authority and presence of the one who owns it all. The Pharisee's separation was from. The missionary's separation is for.

For every follower of Jesus who has wondered whether their ordinary life — their work, their neighborhood, their daily rhythms — could possibly be the sphere of the Spirit's sending, *aphorizate* is the answer. You have been set apart. Not from the world. For it.

## THE QUESTION FOR THE WEEK

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The Spirit spoke during worship and fasting — not during a planning meeting or a strategy session. What does your own life of worship and fasting look like? Is there enough silence and attentiveness in your regular rhythms for the Spirit to direct you?

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*“What Jesus Began: The Spirit Continues” Study Guide* was written by  
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Unless otherwise noted, printed Scripture passages  
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