



WEEK OF MARCH 10, 2024

(COVERS READINGS FROM MARCH 10-16)

Overview

The following information is provided as a basic orientation to reading the Bible. Feel free to add to it and use it in any way that is helpful for your group. Also, feel free to make copies of these pages for members of your group!

Acts 8:26-40 tells of Philip, led by an angel, meeting an Ethiopian eunuch, a high official under the queen of Ethiopia. It's important to note here that while Deuteronomy 23 states that eunuchs should be excluded, Isaiah 56 promises eunuchs "a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters" within God's house, indicating a move toward inclusion in the community of faith. This eunuch, presumably a convert to Judaism, is reading from Isaiah and seeking understanding. Philip explains the scripture, preaching about Jesus, leading to the eunuch's baptism (Acts 8:34-38). This story exemplifies the spread of the Gospel beyond Jewish boundaries, showing God's inclusivity in salvation and the Holy Spirit's guiding role in mission (Acts 8:29, 39).

Acts 10-11:18 tells of Peter's vision and subsequent visit to Cornelius, a Gentile centurion, which marks a significant turning point in the early church. Peter realizes that God shows no partiality and that the Gospel is for all people, not just Jews (Acts 10:34-35). The Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles, leading to their baptism (Acts 10:44-48). Peter's defense of his actions to the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:1-18) highlights the early church's struggle and eventual embrace of Gentile inclusion.

Acts 9:1-31 recounts the dramatic conversion of Saul, a zealous Pharisee persecuting Christians (see Acts 7), on the road to Damascus. Blinded by a vision of Jesus, Saul transforms into Paul, a devoted apostle of Christ (Acts 9:3-6, 17-18). His conversion signifies a major expansion in the church's mission, as Paul becomes the foremost missionary to the Gentiles. His early preaching and the subsequent plots against his life (Acts 9:20-25) illustrate the transformative power of the Gospel and the challenges faced by its messengers.

Acts 13-14 detail Paul and Barnabas' commissioning by the church in Antioch and subsequent first missionary journey, preaching in Cyprus, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. They face both acceptance and opposition, reflecting the varying responses to the Gospel (Acts 13:48-52, 14:1-5). The healing of a lame man in Lystra and the subsequent mistaken identity of Paul and Barnabas as gods (Acts 14:8-18) highlight the cultural and religious challenges in spreading Christianity. Their return to Antioch, reporting the opening of the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27), underscores the guidance of the Holy Spirit in establishing a missionary ethos of the early church.

Acts 15 becomes a pivotal chapter, addressing the growing controversy over Gentile inclusion and the Law. The council at Jerusalem, involving key figures like Peter, Paul, and James, concludes that Gentiles need not follow Jewish law to be Christians (Acts 15:7-11, 19-20). This decision marks a critical moment in defining Christian identity and practice, emphasizing grace over legalism and setting a precedent for resolving doctrinal disputes in the church and maintaining unity.

Acts 16-20 cover Paul's further missionary activities, including his journeys through Asia Minor and Europe. Key events include Paul and Silas in Philippi (Acts 16:16-34), the intellectual engagement at Athens (Acts 17:22-31), and the discipleship and teaching in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-10). These narratives reflect the diverse contexts of early Christian mission, the challenges and opposition encountered, and the growth and strengthening of the church.

The closing chapters of Acts 25-28 narrate Paul's arrest, trials, and journey to Rome as a prisoner. Despite the legal and physical challenges, Paul remains committed to his apostolic mission, using every opportunity to testify about Jesus (Acts 26:1-29, 28:17-31). His shipwreck and subsequent events on Malta (Acts 27-28) illustrate God's providential care and the unstoppable nature of the Gospel. Paul's arrival in Rome symbolizes the Gospel's reach to the heart of the known world, fulfilling Jesus' command to witness "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

General Discussion Questions

Use any or all of the following questions, depending how much time you have:

- How familiar were you with this week's readings? Was there anything that surprised you?
- What do you learn about God from these readings? What do you learn about humanity, or about human nature? How did the authors of these writings understand their relationship with God?
- What passages or aspects of these readings give you comfort or assurance? What passages or aspects of these readings do you find difficult to accept?
- Are there any particular passages that you want to study in-depth?

This Week's Discussion Questions

Acts 8:26-40 | The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch shows the Holy Spirit guiding Philip to someone seeking understanding. How can we be attentive to the Spirit's guidance in our daily lives to help others on their spiritual journey? How does this story challenge our approach to evangelism, especially in the context of cultural and racial differences?

Acts 15 | How does the Jerusalem Council's decision on Gentile believers inform our understanding of grace, freedom, and the essentials of our faith? In what ways might this historical event guide the church in addressing contemporary theological or ethical disputes?

Closing Prayer

Empowering God,
we pray that you will send your Holy Spirit
to move us to understanding;
to help us to believe the gospel;
to give us strength and wisdom to live by it. Amen.