

"People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God."

EVERYONE'S WELCOME AT GOD'S TABLE

ii



INVITED

The gospel is a wonderful invitation to everyone whatever their background, colour, age, gender or economic status. We are saved into the family of God, gathered from every tribe, nation and tongue, and we look forward to a celebratory meal in eternity when believers from every corner of the earth "will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God". What a glorious vision!

In the kingdom of God there are no barriers – all are welcome. But we live in a world which is increasingly full of division. We tend to be drawn to like-minded people and to form our closest relationships among those with whom we have most in common – it is easy to relate to those who are like us socially, racially and in age. The gospel challenges us to be radically different, to break down these dividing walls and join together to display the multi-coloured vision of God.

One of the things I love most about King's is our diversity. God has blessed us with a church made up of people from a variety of backgrounds, races and ages and so I believe that this 'Invited' series is very important, relevant and timely for us. It will be mainly based on the book of Acts, when the early Church grappled with the challenge of building a community made up of people from many different nations. It will be both a celebration of the diversity we have at King's, but also a response to the challenges of diversity and the pain that can be associated with diversity.

I'm looking forward to journeying with you over these next couple of months, hearing your stories and getting a biblical perspective on diversity. I would encourage you to fully embrace this 'Invited' series by being here each Sunday, by talking about it in your Small Group, by sharing your stories with one another, by using this daily devotional and by taking up our 'Invited Hospitality Challenge' (see next page).

Neil Bartlett Senior Pastor

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GUEST SPEAKERS

During the series we're excited to welcome guest speakers:

JOEL EDWARDS



THE ELEPHANT AT THE TABLE

Sunday 11 March

Joel's wide range of experience includes 11 years as General Director of the Evangelical Alliance and 10 years in leadership in Micah Challenge International – a global faith-based response to extreme poverty. He is a freelance broadcaster, a writer and international speaker on a wide range of areas including Bible teaching and issues of justice, leadership, faith and society.

OWEN HYLTON



Owen has been leading Beacon Church in Brixton since 2009, having previously been part of the leadership team at King's Church London. He wrote a book called 'Crossing the Divide – a call to embrace diversity' which comes highly recommended and takes you deeper into the topic of diversity.

WHAT'S ON THE MENU? Sunday 4 March

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THE INVITED HOSPITALITY CHALLENGE

During the 'Invited' series, we are challenging everyone to practise hospitality towards someone from a different cultural background by inviting them round for a meal or out for a coffee, to share some time and your stories together, and to build friendship.

Peter knew what it was to be excluded and also to exclude others (see Galatians 2:11–16), so his words carry weight: 'Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.' (1 Peter 4:8–9)

Some people have a particular gift of hospitality, but we can all be hospitable and we can all keep getting better at hospitality.

There are many excuses we can think of for not practising hospitality – eg:

- *I can't afford it...* but it doesn't have to be expensive, it doesn't have to be a 3 course meal. Keep it simple, do a 'bring & share', team up with someone else and share the cost.
- *I'm not very good at cooking...* but, again, simple is fine! The aim is not to compare ourselves with others and be under pressure to produce gourmet food the aim is to welcome others into our homes and spend time with each other over a meal.
- *I don't have the time*... but if we get the importance of the biblical command to practise hospitality, we will make time. Again, keep it simple and plan ahead!

• *My home is too small...* but that doesn't mean you can't practise hospitality. It's about time together rather than the perfect setting. Or you could team up with a friend who has more space, or invite people into your social spaces, such as the coffee shop or a restaurant.

The important thing to remember is that hospitality isn't about perfection, it's about opening up your home and your life to get to know each other and build community. It doesn't have to be dinner – it can be breakfast, coffee, lunch, afternoon tea, pudding, drinks, bring & share, going out somewhere...

Practising hospitality is really important in a diverse church as it helps to break down stereotypes and barriers, to understand each other more fully and to build genuine friendships and community.

Will you take up the Invited Hospitality Challenge?

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THIS BOOK

DAILY CONTENT

Starting from Sunday 11th February, read the recommended Bible passage from Acts and the devotional notes each day. During the series you will read through the whole of Acts, catching the excitement and challenge as the Church grows. These daily notes will take you through the seven weeks of the series. You will find some prayer topics for the week which will guide your praying. Each day, ask God to speak to you personally through what you are reading and believe that as we read and pray together, God will do great things amongst us.

WEEKLY CONTENT

To get you thinking each week there are some questions to help you reflect on the Sunday preaching – we really want this teaching to change how we do life together! The Sunday preaching is mainly based out of Acts but not chapter by chapter so will not necessarily relate to the readings in the devotional that week. There is a page set aside for you to take notes on the Sunday teaching.

KIDS/FAMILY ACTIVITY

If you have young children there is a weekly activity you could do as a family – choose a time each week when you can do this together. There is a short Bible passage to read together, a question to get you talking, a suggestion for prayer and a simple activity you can do with your children that helps them understand some of the issues around diversity and Acts. Use the sections that will work for your family.

DISCUSS WITH OTHERS

Small Groups are a great place to go deeper with these topics as well as make new friends. You could have follow-up discussions in your Small Group, or why not decide to meet with a couple of friends regularly during the series to discuss your responses to the series and the daily devotional readings? Gathering with others is also a great opportunity to share your own stories, break bread together and pray for one another and for the church.

If you missed the Sunday sermon you can access it on our website (kchw.co.uk/podcast) or on our mobile app.

INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

Acts is a great read. In a way, it is simply the history of the first thirty years of the Church, from the resurrection of Jesus (around 30 AD) to Paul's house arrest in Rome (mid-60s). But like all good history, it doesn't just download everything that happened. Rather, it identifies the material that is most helpful in communicating its message, and focuses on that. The result is a dramatic rollercoaster of healings and jailbreaks, sermons and riots, stonings and shipwrecks.

It was written by Luke, who was a travelling companion of Paul and probably a medical doctor (he makes a couple of brief appearances in chapters 16 and 21, when the narrative changes from "they" to "we"). We can't be sure when it was written, but it was certainly after the mid-60s, and may have been as late as the 80s. But whenever it was, it seems that Luke's purpose in writing a history of the early church was to defend the early Christians against the charge of being troublemakers. If you imagine the Christians up in court, accused of all sorts of terrible things, the book of Acts is like a case for the defence.

You can see this in all sorts of subtle things he does. He focuses a lot on the gift of the Holy Spirit, and is careful to explain that the Spirit has been given to Gentiles and not just Jews – so, presumably, it wouldn't be right for the Romans to allow Judaism but ban Christianity. He includes speeches that highlight the false accusations against Christians (especially Paul) and the futility of trying to stop them (Gamaliel). He spends the final six chapters emphasising Paul's legal innocence. He clarifies that the only thing the Christians tended to do was to preach the gospel and heal people, whereas all the riots and chaos were caused by their enemies. And he ends the story with Paul preaching freely in Rome, without causing any trouble at all. If vou read Acts with Luke's purpose in mind, parts of it will probably become clearer.

But the main thing to see, as we go through the book in our preaching series, is that the gospel is for everyone – Jews, Gentiles, slaves, free, men, women, Romans, Greeks. All are welcome.

Everyone is invited.

Week 1 The world and my table

The gospel goes out in Acts to Samaria and the ends of the earth but also affects who sits at my table.

God loves all people and invites them to His table and so the Church is called to share the good news with all people. To Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. This means that the spread of the gospel, kingdom advance, is characterised by more than just physical expansion, it looks like open hearts and open homes.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

The first Christians were commanded by Jesus to go out from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria and eventually to the ends of the earth. Why was that so important and why did it take courage?

Imagine being Philip meeting the Ethiopian: what would have been the challenges of that cross-cultural conversation?

Recall how you came to faith and who shared the good news with you.

PRAYER TOPICS

Lord, I ask that you will fill me with Your Spirit so I can tell others about all You've done in my life. Give me opportunities to share the good news today, even if it takes me out of my comfort zone! *Amen*

Lord, help me to communicate with people who have different backgrounds from me – give me the words to say that will open up those conversations at work and in my neighbourhood. *Amen*

Lord, help us build a caring, generous community based on Your word. Lord, help me to reach out to others in our church who have needs and to help them practically. Lord, motivate me to be hospitable and invite others around my table. *Amen*

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KIDS/FAMILY DEVOTIONAL

DISCUSS

Think about people at school who you get on with, but also those who you don't or those who don't have many friends or who you think are left out or different. How does it make you feel when you think of these things?

READ MATTHEW $5:\overline{43}-47$

PRAY

Pray for those who are lonely. Is there anything you can do to be friendly to them? Or if you are the one on the outside, ask God to give you confidence to talk to others, to step out of your comfort zone.

ACTIVITY

Draw a picture of people in your class or your friends. Write the names of those you want to pray for this week.

Week 1 THE WORLD AND MY TABLE

Notes

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INVITED!

Sunday 11 February

● ACTS 1:1-11 ●

From the very start of the book of Acts, there is the promise of a huge, global, international, diverse Church. In many ways Acts 1:8 sets the agenda for the whole book: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." In other words, the promise that God originally gave to Abraham – "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" – is about to come true.

First, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." Then, "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem," which takes us up to Acts 6:7. Then "and in all Judea and Samaria," which is the focus up until 9:31. And finally "and to the ends of the earth," which takes us through the rest of the book. Each stage represents an expansion in the scope of God's people, like ripples spreading out in a pool, as Jews and Samaritans, and Asian Gentiles and European Gentiles, and finally Romans, are invited to God's table. And with every new people group comes a new layer of diversity, and a fresh range of challenges.

Notes

INVITE

GOD'S GUIDANCE

Week 1

Monday 12 February

● ACTS 1:12-26 ●

How do you do the Christian life without Jesus, and without the Spirit? It turns out it's pretty tricky, so it's just as well the early Church only had to do it for ten days. Acts 1 shows us what it looks like: prayer, unity (with the apostles, Jesus' brothers and His women disciples all together), reflection on Scripture, and the challenging task of discerning who should replace Judas. In many ways this section serves as a foil for the Pentecost story, by showing us what decision-making looks like without the Holy Spirit's help.

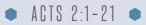
Yet notice that God was still guiding them, not just by lot, but through a combination of the Bible (*"it is written in the book of Psalms"* – v20), leadership (*"Peter stood up among the believers"* – v15) and prayer (*"Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen..."* – v24). All three of those gifts are still available to us, and we should make good use of them – although we should also celebrate the fact that, as a result of Pentecost, we get to do all of these things in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Notes

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Week 1

Tuesday 13 February



One of the effects of the Spirit coming at Pentecost was to bring unity in diversity, by causing people from all over the world to understand the gospel in their own language. Look at the list of unpronounceable places in 2:8–11: "Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs..."

In other words, Jews from all kinds of cultures stretching from modernday Iran to black Africa and up into Europe, were encountering the gospel together, and marvelling at the God whose power was bringing them together. Peter's explanation is comically matter-of-fact, in many ways: "*These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel…*" (v15–16) In other words, 'this is exactly the sort of thing you should expect if you know Scripture!' Men and women, young and old, people from all over the world, prophesying and speaking in languages together. The gospel invites many to become one.

Notes

PETER'S MAGNIFICENT MESSAGE

Wednesday 14 February

● ACTS 2:22-47 ●

Peter's message is magnificent. He pulls together the life of Jesus, the Scriptures and the well-known events of a few weeks earlier: "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact" (v32), and builds towards a triumphant conclusion: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (v36). His hearers are cut to the heart, and ask what they should do next; Peter answers, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (v38) We repent and get baptised; God forgives us and gives His Holy Spirit.

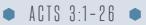
It is a message that produces changed lives. Three thousand people have now "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (v42) And very practically, this mixed group of people, from all over the empire, are suddenly selling their possessions to provide for each other, and eating in one another's homes. When people acknowledge Jesus as Lord, repent and get baptised, they become one with each other – and that produces radical sacrifice for others, even those who are very unlike them.

Notes

12

BLESSING FOR EVERY NATION

Thursday 15 February



The healing of the crippled man at the temple gate is a famous story. Many people also know the opening section of Peter's impromptu message, in which he explains that it is not through his own power, but through the power of Jesus, that the man has been healed (3:11–16). But his call to repentance is less well-known, and introduces two themes that don't often appear in our gospel preaching today.

"Repent then," he says, "and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus" (v19–20). Peter's focus is on the restoration of Israel and the return of Jesus. That doesn't mean that we should necessarily evangelise that way today, since his audience was Jewish and ours mostly isn't, but it is worth noticing that his conclusion is also bound up with Israel's promises: "You are the heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.'" (v25) Peter, like Jesus in Acts 1, has his eyes on the blessing of every nation on earth – not just the one he belonged to – in fulfilment of God's covenant.

Notes

INVITED

ANNOYANCE AND AMAZEMENT!

Friday 16 February

• ACTS 4:1-22 •

I love the exasperation of the Sadducees and the priests: *"They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead."* (v2) Churches on mission often cause worldly powers to be greatly annoyed, and so we should. But their annoyance quickly turns to amazement when they encounter the apostles in person. These Galilean nobodies shouldn't even know how to speak in complete sentences, and here they are causing thousands of people to follow a Galilean nobody, a charlatan, a fake Messiah. Where are they getting it all from?

We know: they have been with Jesus (v13), and they have been filled with the Spirit (v8), which gives them the authority to preach Jesus as the only name by which we can be saved (v12), the power to heal in Jesus' name (v10), and the courage to carry on doing it, no matter the cost (v19–20). The whole situation puts the authorities in a bit of a bind, since everyone is talking about the healing. So the encounter ends with the same sort of frustration with which it began: "After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened." (v21) It must have driven them crazy.

Notes

14

MANY BECOME ONE

Week 1

Saturday 17th February



The apostles, faced with the threats and warnings of the Jewish leaders, begin to pray, and the sovereignty of God is their starting point: "Sovereign Lord... you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them, you spoke through the Psalms about the nations opposing you... we've seen your enemies trying to unite against you these last few weeks, and they have only succeeded in doing what you had predestined them to do. So give us courage Lord! And continue to stretch out your hand to work signs and wonders." (v24–30 paraphrased) Prayers like that can shake buildings, and this one did (v31).

They also increase in unity as a result of the opposition. "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had." (v32) They sell property in order to give to each other, and there is no needy person among them, despite their massive diversity of backgrounds and cultures. So a community that started with 120, just a few weeks previously, now numbers several thousand from all over the known world, and yet they are somehow "one in heart and mind." That's what happens when the Holy Spirit comes. Many become one.

Notes

Week 2 EVERYONE'S INVITED

God has always had a plan to invite people from all nations to His table. There has always been a much bigger plan afoot than we might think – much bigger fish to fry, much larger pots of jollof rice to cook, much greater... You get the point!

God has a plan, and it's not all about me, my tribe and my background. If we can get this in our spirit, it will make a massive difference to what, and how, we build together.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

What do you think about the idea that diversity was on God's heart from the beginning of time? Do you see that in creation? In other stories in the Bible?

What inspires you about the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1–3)? In what ways is our church doing well and in what ways is there room for improvement?

What could you do to help build a stronger, more diverse church?

PRAYER TOPICS

Lord, help me to be ready to help serve others in the church, whether that's through waiting on tables, or praying, or giving, or playing an instrument, or being in the crèche. Lord, help me see the needs of people who are different from me in the church and sacrifice my preferences for their good. *Amen*

Lord, I pray for Christians all over the world who face persecution and opposition – give them the courage that Stephen had (Acts 6–7). May their witness bear fruit. *Amen*

Lord, help me to be like Philip, willing to listen to the prompting of Your Spirit and invite others to find out more about You. Help me know Your word so if anyone asks me, I can use it to point to Jesus. *Amen*

KIDS/FAMILY DEVOTIONAL

DISCUSS

After reading the passage, discuss together as a family how Philip reacted when the angel asked him to get up and go. (You may want to look at the story of Jonah and compare how Philip reacted compared to Jonah.)

READ ACTS 8:26-40

PRAY

Pray for people in your family who don't know God yet. (Make a list.) Ask God: what does He want you to do as a family for Him?

ACTIVITY

Do whatever God prompts you to do in response to the prayer above. Draw a picture of those people in your family you are praying for.

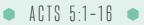
Week 2 EVERYONE'S INVITED

Notes

INVITED

PROBLEMS BRING BREAKTHROUGH

Sunday 18 February



Success usually brings problems. That's what happens in the Jerusalem church, as the example of Barnabas (4:36–37) prompts Ananias and Sapphira to exaggerate the scale of their financial gift, and face the consequences. This story is striking in its seeming severity: we might be inclined to assume that God only killed people in the Old Testament, but this story of a man and a woman being killed instantaneously in the early Church sets us straight on that one. It is a sobering episode that reminds us of the holiness of God and the importance of truth.

The result of these deaths in the church might appear initially to have a negative effect – "*Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.*" (v11) However, ultimately we see a positive effect as we read that they were "*highly regarded by the people*" (v13) and that "*more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number*" (v14). Here, as is so often the case in the Christian life, breakthrough brings problems, and then problems bring breakthrough. Our own examples of that pattern may be less dramatic, but virtually every growing church will bear witness to it. The question is, when this happens: how will the church respond?

Notes

INVITE

OPPOSITION ENDS IN TRIUMPH

Monday 19 February

• ACTS 5:17-42 •

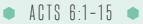
This must be the most matter-of-fact prison break in history. "They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out" (v18–19). In telling the story this simply, Luke is making an important point: you can try and oppose God if you want, but you will always lose. This, in many ways, is the message of not just the rest of Acts 5, but the entire book. "We found the jail securely locked," explain the bewildered officers (v23). "We must obey God rather than men," says Peter (v29). And most emphatically, there is Gamaliel, the influential Pharisee: "if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." (v38–39)

As a result, a chapter that began with opposition ends in triumph, with the apostles responding to their flogging by *"rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name"* (v41) and continuing to preach Christ. Luke's point is a vital one for us to remember today, whether we are facing substantial opposition or not. Human beings can try to disrupt God's purposes, but they can never ultimately prevail. God always wins.

Notes

A DIVERSITY CHALLENGE

Tuesday 20 February



Today's reading reflects a diversity challenge, pure and simple. When churches are made up of different groups, people tend to cluster together with those who are like them. This causes the favouring of some over others (*"their widows were being overlooked"* – v1), and then in taking sides when there is disagreement (*"the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews"* – v1), and in this case the division is so significant that it threatens to derail the mission of the church (*"It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables"* – v2).

The apostles respond well to this diversity challenge: firstly by acknowledging the problem, rather than ignoring it, followed by the decision to develop more leaders ("*choose seven men... full of the Spirit and wisdom*" – v3), and release them into new areas of service. It's also worth noticing that the seven men had Greek names, which indicates that the Hebraic Jews in the group were happy to appoint leaders from the offended party (the Grecian Jews) to care for both Grecian and Hebraic widows. What a wonderful reconciliation! And the result? "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly..." (v7)

Notes

INVITE

GOD'S RESCUE PLAN

Wednesday 21 February

• ACTS 7:1-29 •

As we read Stephen's long speech, we need to bear two things in mind. On the one hand, we need to bear in mind the wider context of the book. This is the speech that causes the persecution, that causes the scattering, that causes the mission of the church to go forward (and if that sounds like 'the old woman who swallowed a bird to catch the spider to catch the fly', it's because Stephen's speech is the fly that starts the whole thing!)

On the other hand, we have to look at what Stephen is doing, because he's not just waffling and playing for time – he's making a very deliberate point. Joseph was rejected by his brothers but became the means of saving them from famine (v9–16). Moses was rejected by his brothers but became the means of saving them from Egypt (v17–29). You can see where Stephen is going. If God's rescue has always happened in spite of Israelite opposition, then we'd expect a figure like Jesus, whom God sent to rescue Israel, to be rejected as well, and for the Jewish leaders to persecute His apostles. It's a dangerous challenge to bring, and it costs Stephen his life. But it's entirely accurate, and leads, in God's providence, to the scattering of the Church, on mission, to invite new people groups to His family.

Notes

GOD'S WAYS AND OUR WAYS

Thursday 22 February

● ACTS 7:30-60 ●

Stephen continues to press the point we saw yesterday: that God's work is always opposed by key people within Israel. But he looks at things from another angle as well, which is the contrast between the hands of men and the hand of God. Humans, Stephen argues, are always looking to control God, and to keep Him confined to the things their hands have built (like temples, which of course is the reason Stephen is in trouble with them in the first place – see 6:13–14). God, however, works salvation by His own hand (v35), and "*the Most High does not live in houses made by men*" (v48). So when human beings respond by creating idols, made by their own hands (v41), they can expect God to judge them, since His hand made everything (v50). Even if those idols are temples.

It is a very clever and fiery critique—and it drives them crazy. As if to prove Stephen's point, as he is gazing into heaven and seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God, they use their human hands to cover their ears, and then to pick up stones and kill him (v57–58). As we read the rest of Acts, we will see this contrast between God's hand and our hands, God's ways and our ways, again and again.

Notes

INVITE

THE SAMARITANS ARE INVITED IN

Friday 23 February

● ACTS 8:1-25 ●

From the jaws of defeat comes victory. Stephen's death is a tragedy, considered on its own terms, but its immediate effect is that, apart from the apostles, the Church was "*scattered throughout Judea and Samaria*" (v1). Until this point, Jesus' missionary trajectory for the Church – Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the ends of the earth (1:8) – has hardly got started. The Church is still in one city. Now, through the sheer intensity of persecution, missionaries are going all over the place, including to Israel's old enemy, Samaria. This is a key turning point in the story.

Through the visit of the apostles, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the rejection of Simon, God is making clear that the Samaritans are invited into His people on exactly the same terms as the Jews. The ethnic prejudice and superiority that Israel had felt towards the Samaritans for centuries was now off-limits, because the Spirit of God Himself had been given to them – and Peter and John could see the evidence with their own eyes. From now on, Samaritan and Jewish believers were one body, sharing one Spirit, one Lord, one faith and one baptism (Eph 4:4–6).

Notes

THE INVITATION GOES TO AN AFRICAN

Saturday 24 February

• ACTS 8:26-40 •

It is not often noticed, but it has enormous significance: the first individual whose conversion is described in Acts is a black African. Until Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, Luke's story has largely concerned groups, leaders, or enemies of the gospel. Here, for the first time, we have the story of a convert, and he is both from a foreign land (Ethiopia) and formally disqualified from temple worship (because he has been castrated).

For those with ears to hear, he represents the invitation to outsiders. God is very active in the story: an angel speaks to Philip, the Spirit tells him to join the Ethiopian's chariot, the eunuch is already reading the Scriptures, and as soon as he climbs out of the baptism waters, the Spirit carries Philip away to Azotus. God is passionately concerned that the nations should join His family – it was a central part of His promise to Abraham (*"all peoples on earth will be blessed"*) – and if that means sending angels and teleporting travelling evangelists, then so be it. God's Church was never intended to be from just one nation or just one colour. From this point on, it will not be.

Notes

Week 3 A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Week 3

28

Everyone is accepted by God if they respond to the invitation. We love this idea of a diverse church – but do we really accept people or just tolerate them? Kingdom advance will affect who I eat with, who I visit and ultimately who I share the gospel with. But the journey starts by learning to accept one another. Peter has to be persuaded through a dramatic vision three times that God accepts the people he thought were unclean and that He has plans to use Peter to preach the gospel to them.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

Peter realises that God has no favourites but accepts men from every nation – Acts 10:34–35. Read those verses and consider what that means for you and for our church.

Are there people you find difficult to accept and move towards? Reflect on this and ask God to reveal why and to change your heart.

What were the consequences of Peter accepting the invitation to go to see Cornelius?

PRAYER TOPICS

Lord, thank you that you still change people's hearts when they come to You. Thank you for Your work in my heart. Remind me of anyone I keep away from or judge by what I've heard or seen. Help me to see them as You do and reach out to them in friendship. *Amen*

Lord, open my eyes to see the mission You have for me in my work, home and neighbourhood. Lord, let me respond to the knocks on my door, my life, with willingness to be used by You even if I'm not sure, like Peter was, what will happen next! *Amen*

Lord, thank you that we are all invited to Your table, no one is excluded or unclean, You love everyone. Help me be the kind of person that breaks down barriers and welcomes everyone. *Amen*

KIDS/FAMILY DEVOTIONAL

DISCUSS

What is your favourite toy, game, etc.? Then after reading the Scripture, discuss the truth that God has no favourites – He loves us all the same.

READ ACTS 10:34-35

PRAY

Pray that you would be a family who will think of others. Think of another family to pray for.

ACTIVITY

Do something fun with another family. As a family think about who you could invite round and share time together.

INVITED

Week 3 A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Notes

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INVITED

GENTILES INVITED INTO GOD'S PEOPLE

Sunday 25 February

● ACTS 9:1-25 ●

As the story of Acts moves outwards from Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the most surprising twist is that Gentiles (non-Jews) are invited into the people of God. But the means by which God does this is also surprising. He uses a man well-known for his opposition to all things Christian – a man whose persecution of the Church is so fierce that the risen Jesus can say, "*why do you persecute me?*" (v4) God would bring the gospel to the Gentiles through a man who hates Christians, hates the Church and is as zealously Jewish as you could be. The ultimate outsiders are invited in by the ultimate insider.

It requires Ananias to step out into the unknown and befriend someone he would not normally go near. Ananias is terrified: "Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem" (v13), but God sends him anyway: "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings..." (v15). It is only in Ananias' obedience that Saul gets converted – and it is only in Saul's obedience ("At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God" – v20) that we are. Inviting outsiders takes courage. And it is only through the courageous steps of others that any of us are here.

Notes

INVITE

JESUS GAVE THEM A MISSION

Monday 26 February

● ACTS 9:26-43 ●

Back in Acts 1:8 we saw that Luke uses Jesus' words as the structure for his book as a whole: Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, then the ends of the earth. The second of these sections comes to an end here in 9:31: *"Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and, encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord."* Luke is saying: Jesus gave them a mission, and so far, it's working.

The story then switches back to Peter, having focused for a few chapters on Stephen (ch6–7), Philip (ch8) and Saul (ch9), as he travels north healing a man with paralysis (v32–34) and a woman who has died (v36–41). It is interesting that the same command of healing is given in both stories: "*Get up!*" or "*Rise!*" The same Greek word (anistemi) is used in Luke 24:46 to describe Jesus rising from the dead. The name of Jesus, the risen one, causes people to rise, even when they have no strength (like Aeneas) or even life (like Tabitha) of their own.

Notes

BARRIERS

Tuesday 27 February

● ACTS 10:1-23 ●

All of us put up barriers. We have ways of deciding who is in, and who is out. Some of those boundaries may be good (none of us let axe-murderers look after our children), but many of them become ways of separating the human race into "in-groups" and "out-groups", people we love and people we don't. For Peter, Gentiles were the out-group. It simply wasn't in his thinking that he would preach the gospel to Gentiles – it was against Jewish law for him to even associate with or visit a Gentile.

So before telling Peter to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his household, God has to remove the barrier. He gives Peter a vision in which unclean food, lowered down from heaven on a giant sheet, is pronounced clean. The idea of unclean food might seem strange to us (although I'm sure we can all think of animals we would be pretty disgusted to eat), but the strength of Peter's resistance is evident in that God has to show him the vision three times. God is softening Peter's boundaries: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (v15). That is an important lesson for us to take on board, and would be vital in what happens next in the story.

Notes

INVITE

ALL ARE INVITED TO GOD'S TABLE

Wednesday 28 February

● ACTS 10:24-48 ●

The vision of the sheet is just the prologue. God is not really trying to teach Peter to eat pork (which he probably didn't), but to welcome the pork-eaters: Gentiles like Cornelius, Romans, Greeks, Barbarians, even British people. The vision does the trick. As he begins to speak to these God-fearing Gentiles, Peter explains: "God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean" (v28). No person, whatever their race, culture or eating habits, is unclean. All are invited to God's table.

So he preaches the gospel to them: God anointed Jesus with power, He healed those who were oppressed by the devil, they killed Him, and God raised Him up. But while Peter is still speaking, "the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (v44–45). This is one of the most important verses in the book, because it shows not just that Peter has accepted the Gentiles, but that God Himself has. The gift of the Spirit is the proof that a person belongs to God – so, as Peter asks, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." (v47) Quite!

Notes

YOU ATE WITH THEM?!

Thursday 1 March

• ACTS 11:1-18 •

As glorious as the salvation of the Gentiles is, it causes real concern in the Jerusalem church. The main point of contention is the fact that Peter had a meal with them: "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them" (v3). Eating together, in Jewish culture then as in many cultures today, is not just a matter of convenience, but communicates important things – inclusion, welcome and acceptance – and that is why people in the Jerusalem church are worried about it. So Peter has to explain himself.

If chapter 11 seems like a rehash of chapter 10, that is deliberate on Luke's part: not only does he want to tell such a significant story twice – remember that Luke is a Gentile himself – but he also wants to draw our attention to the objections faced by the early Gentile converts, and those who invited them in. As he retells the story, he makes a point which represents the theme of Acts: "So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" (v17) Gamaliel had said something very similar in chapter 5. If God is for them, who can stand against them?

Notes

THE OUTSIDERS HAVE COME IN

Friday 2 March

• ACTS 11:19-30 •

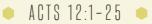
Cornelius' conversion is the first of many. From one household of Gentiles in Caesarea, we now have "a great number" in Antioch, so much so that the Jerusalem apostles feel they need to send Barnabas to check it out. Most people scattered from Jerusalem had only been preaching to Jews, but "Some of them... from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus" (v20). The result was the first Gentile-majority church in history, full of the grace of God, where "a great number of people were brought to the Lord" (v24) and "the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch" (v26). The outsiders have come in, and the identity of the people of God has changed forever.

Also notice: the church made up of outsiders is the church that shows great generosity to the church in Judea. Antioch responds at once to the prophecy of famine, giving "each according to his ability" (v29). I wonder whether the experience of being outsiders invited in made them all the more aware of the plight of others – even when those others were Jews, hundreds of miles away. As Paul says in Romans 15, we should welcome and accept others because God, in Christ, has welcomed and accepted us.

Notes

SEVERE CONSEQUENCES

Saturday 3 March



The persecution that hits the church at the start of Acts 12 has severe consequences. James, the brother of John (not to be confused with James the brother of Jesus, who appears in verse 17) is killed, and Peter is thrown into prison. However, as Gamaliel and Peter himself have already pointed out, human opposition cannot stop the purposes of God. If it takes an angel (v7–9), a miraculous prison break (v10–11) and the supernatural death of the king (v20–23) to protect the church and keep the word spreading, then that's what God will do.

It's also worth noting the frequent presence of angels in this chapter. An angel breaks Peter out of prison. An angel strikes down Herod. When Rhoda sticks her head into the prayer meeting to say that Peter is at the front door, the church reply, "*It must be his angel*" (v15). It seems that angelic visitations were common in the early Church – common enough that people could think they were more likely to turn up at the door than imprisoned apostles. When God is doing a new thing, his messengers are always on hand to see it done.

Notes

Week 4 THE ELEPHANT AT THE TABLE

Week 4

Trust is the big hurdle – the elephant at the table! Ananias is very cautious and even suspicious of Saul – there is history! In the end he has to trust God and, out of that trust, reach out to Saul. To let someone in, to disclose something of who we really are – our fears, concerns, vulnerabilities – means to start to build some kind of relationship with them. But that's hard if you don't trust them. There are trust issues between cultures – and between classes. Some are for very understandable reasons, because one class, or one culture, has abused its position of power at the expense of another. We have to somehow break that cycle and risk a little – it is a sensitive subject, and yet unless we address it, we may sit at the same table, but we will never truly be together.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

Have you ever had to step out and trust God about someone? Did that work out positively for you as it did for Ananias?

1 Peter 2:4–5 speaks about us being like living stones being built together into a spiritual house. Do you trust that God has put people around you who He wants to build the church with? What difference does that make?

Is God asking you to invite someone for a coffee or to sit round your table?

PRAYER TOPICS

Lord, I pray for the leaders in our church – keep them following Your mission and build them together as a team. Raise up leaders who reflect the diversity of our church. May our church, imperfect though we are, be used to spread the good news about Jesus. *Amen*

Lord, help me to see when change is necessary so Your gospel can go out and the church be welcoming to all kinds of people. Forgive me when I cling on to old ways of doing things just because it's comfortable for me. *Amen*

Lord, I am amazed that Paul and Silas would sit down to eat with their torturer and jailer (Acts 16:34). Help me forgive others who have wronged me, reflecting just how much You have forgiven me. *Amen*

KIDS/FAMILY DEVOTIONAL

DISCUSS

What does trust mean? Who do you trust and why? Who do you not trust and why? Discuss the trust in God that Ananias showed in the reading.

READ ACTS 9:10-19

PRAY

Pray to be able to hear God and trust God like Ananias did. Spend some time quietly listening to God – is there anything God is asking you to do that means you have to trust Him?

ACTIVITY

Do a 'trust walk' where one person is blindfolded and has to walk around obstacles guided by the instructions of someone else.

Week 4 THE ELEPHANT AT THE TABLE

Notes

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Sunday 4 March

● ACTS 13:1-26 ●

The church in Antioch, which as we have seen was the first Gentile-majority church in history, has a remarkably diverse leadership team (v1). Barnabas is a Cypriot Jew. Simeon is a black African. Lucius is from North Africa. Manaen was brought up with Herod, which gives him a certain social prestige, whatever his ethnicity. Saul, of course, is a Jew from modern Turkey who speaks Greek. This shows us something of the cross-cultural, unifying impact that the gospel had in the Antioch church.

Nevertheless, they respond to the Holy Spirit's direction obediently, and send Barnabas and Saul off on apostolic mission. In Paul's sermon in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, we see an example of Paul's gospel message and how he tailors it to the audience he's talking to (compare this to how he speaks in Athens in Acts 17). He builds bridges towards them, calling them 'brothers' (v26), referring to 'our fathers' (v17) and tells them the story of Jesus as it fits within their own Jewish story. This then gives him permission to go on to tell the truth of the gospel and the message of repentance. The truth of the gospel never changes, but we must think about the bridges we need to build with different people to show them why they should follow Jesus.

THE MAJORITY MUST CHANGE

Monday 5 March

• ACTS 13:27-52 •

One of the greatest challenges of diversity, whether in the ancient world or today, is the fact that majority groups don't tend to want to change. Paul doesn't want this for the people of Pisidian Antioch. So he quotes the prophets to show that God is doing a new thing in bringing the nations into the church: "I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you" (v41), and then to show that this new thing was always in His plan for the world: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (v47).

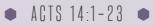
The Gentiles think this is wonderful: "they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (v48). But some of the Jews were less impressed, and "incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region" (v50). Privilege can blind, and it does here. Happily, Paul and Barnabas continued on their mission, and "the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (v52).

Notes

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THE THREAT OF OPPOSITION & SUCCESS

Tuesday 6 March



What is the greatest threat to the Church: opposition or success? The book of Acts answers: both. Persecution is more obvious – it's hard to carry on as usual when your leaders are being imprisoned, stoned or killed with the sword. But Luke wants us to know that there are challenges with success, too. Gospel growth can lead to deceit (5:1–10), division (6:1–7), greed (8:18–24) and criticism (11:1–3). The Galatian mission produces both kinds of problem for Paul and Barnabas.

In Iconium, despite a positive response from both Jews and Greeks, they are eventually driven out of town as a result of persecution (v5-7). They flee to Lystra, where they experience the opposite problem: a miraculous healing convinces the locals that they are gods in human form, and they have the (presumably surreal) experience of having to explain why they are not (v8-18). Then they face direct attack again, and this time Paul is nearly killed (v19-23). Breaking barriers with the gospel is dangerous. But it's never boring.

Notes

INVITE

EVERYONE IS INVITED!

Wednesday 7 March

• ACTS 14:24-15:21 •

In most modern stories, the climactic moment happens towards the end. In many ancient stories, on the other hand, it happens in the middle (think of Joshua's conquest, David's anointing as king, Solomon's temple, Nehemiah's wall, Peter's confession of Christ, and so on). The Jerusalem Council, in many ways, is the climax of Luke's story in Acts. It's the moment when the question that has been simmering since chapter 10, and which will ultimately cause Paul's arrest in chapter 21, gets resolved: do you have to be circumcised to be saved?

The answer is an emphatic 'no'. Peter speaks first, and makes his argument on the basis of the Spirit: God has poured out His Spirit on uncircumcised people – "*He made no distinction between us and them*" (v9). James goes next, and grounds his argument in the word: "*the words of the prophets are in agreement with this*" (v15). There are still implications for new believers, as we will see. But this is a game-changer for the church. From now on, no matter what a person's ethnicity or religious background, they are welcome. Everyone is invited.

THE OPPORTUNITIES OF DIVERSITY

Thursday 8 March

• ACTS 15:22-41 •

It's easy to be right, and yet still to be wrong. You can reach the right answer, but make such a mess of communicating and handling it that you make things worse (especially when handling cultural differences!). By the grace of God, the Jerusalem church didn't make that mistake. Having figured out the answer to their diversity challenge – that Gentiles don't have to be circumcised to get saved – they also handled it with wisdom.

They came to a consensus together, not just as apostles and elders, but "with the whole church" (v22, 25). They prioritised it, by sending their best people (v25–27) and allowing plenty of time (v33). They sought the Holy Spirit together (v28). They presented their approach in an encouraging way that brought peace to everybody involved (v31–33). Most importantly, they recognised the sacrifices that would have to be borne on both sides; the Jews would have to welcome Gentiles who weren't circumcised, and the Gentiles would have to change their behaviour when it came to food, sex and worship (v29). The result is still blessing us today: "The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message" (v31). Diversity presents tricky challenges, but it also presents glorious opportunities.

Notes

PURSUING DIVERSITY IS COSTLY

Week 4

Friday 9 March

• ACTS 16:1-24 •

When we first encounter Timothy, we immediately face the question: why on earth did Paul circumcise him? The Church has just come to the decision that Gentiles don't have to be circumcised, and Paul has been sent to tell everyone that. So what is going on here? The answer takes us to the heart of Paul's missionary approach that we saw back in Acts 13. Getting Timothy circumcised certainly won't make him any more saved, but it will almost certainly make him more fruitful by building bridges to the people they are trying to reach. Often, pursuing diversity comes at a cost. In Timothy's case, that cost was personal and painful!

But what fruit resulted from it! Following a vision (v9), Paul, Silas and Timothy take the gospel to Europe for the first time (v10–12), where they establish a church in Philippi. Even the Philippian converts themselves are diverse: a wealthy, independent woman (v11–15), a demonised slavegirl (v16–19) and a jailer (v25–34). Paul and Silas get imprisoned for their efforts, reflecting the twin themes of breakthrough and persecution. But from Acts 16 onwards, Europe has a gospel-preaching church. Two millennia later, it still does.

Notes

THEIR TORTURER SERVES THEM DINNER!

Saturday 10 March

● ACTS 16:25-40 ●

Most Western people reading the story of the Philippian jailer will notice the singing in the stocks, the prison break, the jailer's question ("*What must I do to be saved?*") and Paul's response ("*Believe in the Lord Jesus, you and your household*"). Some of us will also notice the fact that he and his household got baptised, which shows us that whatever mini-gospel message Paul preached to them, it included baptism as part of the response. But what hardly any of us notice, at least without having it pointed out first, is what happened next. "*The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them*" (v34).

That part of the jailer's response doesn't usually make it into evangelistic pamphlets. "Repent, believe, receive the Spirit, be baptised, eat a meal together." But again and again in Acts, we see it happening when people respond to the gospel (2:46; 6:1–3; 9:19; 11:3; 16:34). This isn't because people in the ancient world were always hungry; it's because eating together was – and in many ways still is – a sign of friendship, solidarity, unity and fellowship. A few hours earlier, this man had been torturing Paul and Silas; now he's serving them dinner. The gospel changes everything.

Notes

INVITE

Week 5 WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

What does a diverse church look like? Lots of compromise! How do we work out guidelines for doing cross cultural church? How do we become adept at reaching all people? What do we all compromise on? What truths and practices should we hold on to? The early Church wrestled with these questions.

What are the barriers we put up and the bridges we need to build? What's on the menu? How do we set the table to welcome everyone? Food is great fun cross-culturally – possibly more than anywhere else it highlights the great and wonderful strengths of all the cultures and backgrounds – but it also illustrates the differences. Can you imagine what it would be like to try and create a meal for all of us that would satisfy everyone's preferences?

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

Acts 15:19: "*we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God*". What do we do that makes it difficult for some to come to faith?

In Acts 15 how did they work out guidelines for doing cross-cultural church?

How did Paul reach out to cities with different cultures? How can you become adept at reaching all people?

PRAYER TOPICS

Lord, if there are areas in my life where I have advantages or privileges, help me use these generously for your kingdom, not selfishly. Help me be aware when that undermines others, even if it is unintentional. Forgive me for the times I have taken advantage of others. *Amen*

Paul was willing to suffer because of his unshakeable conviction that Jesus was raised from the dead and that He is Lord of all the nations. Open my eyes to who Jesus is: risen, exalted and Lord of all so I can pray in faith for what's going on in the world right now. *Amen*

Lord, I pray for capital cities around the world. May Your Gospel take hold in these cities and large, vibrant churches grow to influence governments and powerful people showing that You are alive. *Amen*

KIDS/FAMILY DEVOTIONAL

DISCUSS

Read the Scripture and then thank God that in heaven all kinds of people will worship and celebrate together. Discuss how we see this diversity in part in the church and how different the church is to the world.

READ REVELATION 7:9-10

PRAY

Pray that people from all over the world will find faith in Jesus. If you have friends or family in another country pray for them or pray for Christians who are persecuted around the world.

ACTIVITY

Draw a cross and fill it in with different flags from around the world.

Week 5 WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

Notes

48

INVITED

REVOLUTIONARY GOSPEL

Sunday 11 March

• ACTS 17:1-15 •

The gospel has revolutionary, turbulent, subversive power. It's hardly surprising: it is the announcement of God made flesh, a dead man made alive, the first made last and the last made first, forgiveness for sinners and judgment for sin, blessing for the poor and woe to the rich, the bringing down of the mighty and the exaltation of the humble. If a message like that doesn't upset the apple cart, something has gone wrong somewhere.

This week's readings will show that happen several times, but nobody expresses it as clearly as the people of Thessalonica: "*These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here… saying that there is another king, one called Jesus*" (v6–7). What an endorsement! It's annoying for Paul and Silas, of course—they have to flee by night (v10), and even after they get a slightly better reception in Berea, the Thessalonians reappear and make a nuisance of themselves again (v13)—but that's what the gospel does. And despite the best efforts of Paul's opponents, the Thessalonian church is established anyway. It even gets two books of the Bible written to it!

Notes

LISTEN, THEN SPEAK

Monday 12 March

• ACTS 17:16-34 •

Paul's sermon in Athens is probably the most famous speech in Acts, and with good reason. It is a masterclass of contextualization. As we've already seen in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13, Paul understands the people he's speaking to, and uses the strengths of their culture to lead them to Christ. He knows how their worship works (v16). He reasons in religious and secular contexts (v17). He compliments them (v22). He quotes their own altars (v23) and poets (v28), emphasising what is good before explaining what is missing. Which is, in a word, Jesus. In his contextualisation, Paul doesn't deviate from the key truths about Jesus, resurrection and repentance (v18, 30–31).

Paul's example shows us something crucial: inviting people to follow Jesus requires listening before speaking, understanding before being understood. It's harder to proclaim the true God to people if you don't know anything about the gods they worship already. Not only that, but loving people means starting from where they are, not just where we are. Paul's example, then, is helpful not just for evangelism – though that in particular – but for any time we are crossing over into someone else's context or culture. Listen, then speak. Two ears, one mouth.

SENSE, SCRIPTURE AND SPIRIT

Tuesday 13 March

● ACTS 18:1-23 ●

Paul's perseverance in Corinth is a wonderful example of the way in which common sense wisdom, biblical revelation and supernatural power can work together. Many Christians are inclined to play these three off against one another, or at least to regard one of them as less valuable than the others; we might regard people who excel in other areas as unspiritual pragmatists, elitist bookworms or super-spiritual loonies. In Paul's life, especially when he is facing tough situations, they all come together.

He makes wise decisions using common sense: choosing to stay with Priscilla and Aquila because they are tentmakers too (v2-3), starting his evangelism with Jewish people he already understands (v4, 19), going to the Gentiles when opposition starts (v6-7), and so on. He continued to rely on and teach the word of God (v11). And he experiences supernatural revelation at a key time, receiving a vision telling him what to do – "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you and no-one is going to attack or harm you, because I have many people in this city" (v9-10 - a key Scripture for us at King's).

Sense, Scripture, Spirit. If Paul needed all three, we do too.

Notes

GOSPEL FOR ALL NATIONS

Wednesday 14 March

• ACTS 18:24-19:20 •

As we've gone through Acts together, we've seen several places where Luke gives us little progress updates. Act I, based in Jerusalem, concludes at 6:7: "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly..." Act II, in Judea, Galilee and Samaria, ends with 9:31; Act III covers the inclusion of the Gentiles (12:24); and Act IV is summarised when the gospel has reached Asia Minor (16:5). Act V, in which the gospel finally reaches Europe, builds towards 19:20: "In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power." Luke keeps telling us: things are still on track. Jesus has kept the promise he made in 1:8.

The church in Ephesus begins with the preaching of Apollos (18:24–28), then the gift of the Spirit coming to disciples of John (19:1–7), then the preaching of Paul (v8–10), and then a remarkable (if bizarre) exorcism-gone-wrong (v11–20). Yet even in the midst of all this action, Luke keeps reminding us that the Church is diverse: "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia..." (v10), and "the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus..." (v17). Don't lose sight of it, he's saying: This gospel is for all nations.

I PREDICT A RIOT

Thursday 15 March

● ACTS 19:21-41 ●

The establishment of the church in Ephesus, in modern Turkey, occupies more of the story than any other since Jerusalem. We hear of its foundation (yesterday), the riot it produced (today), and what happened after Paul left (the day after tomorrow). As we look at today's passage, the thing that strikes us, once again, is the way the gospel turns the world upside down, rather than chatting nicely to society's powerbrokers. It's like the bishop I heard recently, who commented: "Wherever Paul went, there was a riot. Wherever I go, they serve tea."

The main reason for opposition to Paul's gospel is money: "You know we receive a good income from this business" (v25). But this objection is disguised in the language of gods and values, as objections about money, sex and power often are: "Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people... He says that man-made gods are no gods at all... the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited..." (v26–27). This then leads to a riot. It's worth stopping, when there is a kerfuffle about the challenge of the gospel in the UK, to look behind the values discussions and consider whether someone is losing money, sex or power somewhere. If they are, they won't like it.

Notes

ONE-NEW-MAN CHURCH

Friday 16 March

● ACTS 20:1-16 ●

The 'travel texts' in Acts are easy to skim-read, because they list places that are only known to us today, if at all, through holiday brochures (Macedonia, Greece, Assos, Samos, Kos, Rhodes and so on). But today's passage is actually a great example of how there is more to them than that. In the central section (v7–12), we have the raising of Eutychus after he falls out of a third storey window. (I love how Paul doesn't take this as a cue to stop speaking but carries on talking until daylight!) In the other two parts (v1–6 and v13–16), however, we find Paul's commitment to invite both Jews and Greeks into God's people reinforced.

Both texts summarise an extensive Greek mission, with all sorts of cities and islands being reached, and various Greek missionaries joining him on his travels (including Luke, who subtly makes us aware he is there by writing "we" instead of "they"). Yet both texts also conclude with a reference to a major Jewish festival (Unleavened Bread in v6, Pentecost in v16). Despite his Gentile mission, Paul is still passionate about the Jews. His commitment to a Jew-and-Gentile, one-new-man Church, which he describes so beautifully in Galatians and Ephesians, is not just talk. He gives his life to it.

LEADERSHIP IS TIRING!

Saturday 17 March

● ACTS 20:17-38 ●

Virtually all of us are leaders somewhere. In the home, at work, in our marriages and families, in friendship circles – if leadership is influence, then all of us are leaders in some way or other. And Paul's address to the Ephesian elders may be the most helpful passage in the New Testament on leading as a Christian. Even though it applies specifically to elders in the church, it casts a glorious vision of what Jesus-shaped leadership looks like.

It is hard work (v19, 34). It is inclusive, involving all sorts of people who may not get on with each other (v20–21). It is costly, and involves suffering (v22–25). It takes courage, both to tell people whatever God wants them to hear (v26–27), and to lay down your life to protect people, just as Jesus did (v28–31). It is utterly dependent on grace (v32), rather than money, which you may not get anyway (v33–34). It is emotionally exhausting sometimes, because loving people is often accompanied by losing people (v36–38). Yet for all this, it is a life of blessing, because as Jesus said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (v35). Parents, managers, spouses, friends: leadership is tiring, but it is worth it. Hang in there.

Notes

INVITE

Week 6 BEST SERVED WITH GRACE

Every good meal needs seasoning – this is no exception. To eat together, to build relationships together across culture, class and generations is not always easy – there are potential misunderstandings everywhere. Some will be quite funny cultural differences – some will be painful as we each tread on really sensitive issues without realising it. Criticism and misunderstanding is inevitable – forgiveness is critical. Change is demonstrated in eating together. We need lots of grace for one another. Forgiveness is the only way through and is key to the trust issue. This is an on-going process.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

Were you surprised that Peter, after having such a dramatic vision in Acts 10 and seeing the Gentiles come to faith, withdraws and stops eating with them in Galatians 2? Have you ever found yourself withdrawing from fellowship with certain peoples because of misunderstandings or prejudice?

What can you do differently going forward?

Are there people or groups of people that God is asking you to forgive? How can you start the process today and continue to have a ready heart to forgive?

PRAYER TOPICS

Lord, help me remember Your gospel turns the world upside down! Let me never settle for the status quo but always follow You wholeheartedly. Help me to stand up for the gospel, for justice and truth even if it goes against what our culture says and does. *Amen*

Lord, help me understand our culture and the big questions that people around me are asking. Help me talk about Jesus in a way that catches their attention. Give me a love of people who are far from You. *Amen*

Lord, I pray for Your Church that it will keep growing all over the world. Lord I pray for our church that we will grow, keep true to Your word and see people's lives changed. *Amen*

KIDS/FAMILY DEVOTIONAL

DISCUSS

Why is it good to say sorry when we've done something wrong? Is there anything that we need to say sorry for? Or is there anything that we need to forgive anyone else for?

READ MATTHEW 6:9-13

PRAY

'Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need, and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.' (NLT)

ACTIVITY

Draw a picture of yourself and write in big letters: FORGIVEN, LOVED, ACCEPTED.

Week 6 BEST SERVED WITH GRACE

Notes

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INVITED

DIVERSITY IS COSTLY

Sunday 18 March

● ACTS 21:1-16 ●

Pursuing diversity is costly. We have seen that already in Acts, but this week it will become a major theme, as Paul's commitment to reach both Jews and Gentiles takes him into danger, captivity, and very nearly death. If Paul had only sought to reach Jews, or only Gentiles, much of the suffering he faced could have been avoided (although not entirely, as the Jerusalem church shows). But his commitment to build churches of Jews and Greeks, wherever he went, got him into trouble repeatedly.

In this passage, what is striking are the ways in which Paul was urged not to go to Jerusalem. The disciples in Tyre were urging him not to go "through the Spirit" (v4), which is a fascinating phrase. Agabus the prophet, whom we met earlier in chapter 11, prophesies: "In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles" (v11). The rest of the church in Caesarea then warn him not to go (v12). It is only when they realise Paul cannot be persuaded that they eventually give up (v14). Paul knew his commission. Nothing could stop him.

Notes

PAUL IS ARRESTED

Monday 19 March

● ACTS 21:17-36 ●

Paul is ultimately arrested, as he knew he would be, and most of the rest of Acts is concerned with his trial. So in many ways this passage is crucial for the whole story, because it explains why that happened – and why, when we know all the facts, we should regard Paul as innocent (much like Jesus, Peter, John, Stephen and all the other Christians Luke has told us about).

Paul takes every precaution, following the instructions the Jerusalem brothers have given him to the letter. He knows that many Jews regard him with suspicion because of his Gentile mission, and might cause trouble, so he purifies himself and his friends before going to the temple, to ensure there is no basis for accusing him. But they accuse him anyway, so that "*the whole city was aroused*" (v30) and "*trying to kill him*" (v31). The charge against him – "*he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place*" (v28) – is completely untrue, but the mud sticks, and Paul is first beaten, and then arrested by soldiers, to save him from the crowd. The explosive cocktail of observant Jews and outsider Gentiles (like you and me!) has finally led to Paul's capture.

PAUL RISKS ALL FOR OUTSIDERS

Tuesday 20 March

• ACTS 21:37-22:21 •

When Paul is first arrested, the soldiers holding him have absolutely no idea why. "Aren't you the Egyptian who stirred up a revolt?" they ask him (21:38). It is clear they have no basis for charging him at all, so they allow Paul to make a defence, not just to the commander, but even to the crowd. Switching to Aramaic/Hebrew – knowing multiple languages is helpful in cross-cultural mission (22:2)! – he explains his story.

The account of his conversion is different in important ways from the version in Acts 9, partly to diffuse the situation. "I am a Jew... brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today" (v3). "Ananias... a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there" (v12). His point, of course, is simply: I'm a good Jew, and so are other Christians, so you should leave us alone. It is all going well, until he says the word that makes people crazy: "I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (v21). Paul cannot help himself. He is committed to inviting the outsiders in, even if he's on trial for his life.

Notes

INVITE

PRIVILEGE AND HOW TO USE IT

Wednesday 21 March

• ACTS 22:22-23:11 •

On hearing about the Gentile mission, the crowd turns immediately. "*He's not fit to live*!" they shout, and start throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air (22:22–23). The Romans arrange for his torture by flogging, but at the last minute, Paul plays his Roman citizen card – which you'd think he might have mentioned earlier! – and gets out of it (v24–29). He is eventually examined by the Jewish Council instead, so that the Roman commander can work out what is going on (22:30–23:10).

Notice Paul's privilege, and how he uses it. Linguistically, he speaks Greek and Hebrew. Politically, he is a Roman citizen. Religiously, he is a "Pharisee of Pharisees." Intellectually, he is sharp enough to divide the Jewish Council as they try to accuse him (v6–8). Morally, he cannot be accused of wrongdoing (v9). Yet he doesn't sit on all these privileges: he uses all of them to bring the message of Jesus to as many people as possible. As he will later explain in Philippians 3:8, "*I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him.*"

THE THREAT TO THE INSIDERS

Thursday 22 March

● ACTS 23:12-35 ●

It can be hard for us to understand the hatred some of the Jews felt for Paul. What could possibly drive people to persecute this man from pillar to post, simply for inviting Gentiles into the people of God? What could make forty people vow never to eat or drink until Paul is killed (v12–15)? What is so dangerous about this man, that it requires two hundred soldiers and seventy horsemen to protect him from being assassinated on his way to the governor (v23–30)? You can tell that both the commander and the governor were baffled in the same way.

But in the Jewish world, the whole sweep of Scripture and the promises to Abraham were at stake. If Gentiles can enter without being circumcised, then it could imply the Jews have no special claim or unique status before God at all. So if the Jesus-movement is growing – and at this point, it certainly is – it calls into question the whole purpose and meaning of being a Jew. Paul, as we see from his letters, is acutely aware of this problem, and insists that there is a huge advantage to being Jewish (Romans 3:1–8; 11:1–36). But his opponents thought his mission was destroying their way of life. So they tried to kill him.

JESUS IS LORD OF ALL NATIONS

Friday 23 March

● ACTS 24:1-21 ●

Acts 24 sees the charges against Paul finally clarified, along with his response. (The Roman justice system doesn't always come off well when you read about it, but at least you're allowed to respond to the accusations against you.) The charge against him is dramatic: "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him" (v5–6). Note the strong language. In inviting outsiders to join God's people, Paul is a "troublemaker" (also translated "plague"), a "ringleader" and a "desecrator". Diversity can really get up people's noses.

Paul, of course, sees things differently. He knows that their accusations are false (v11–13) and he has a clear conscience (v16–18), but his suspicion is that the problem goes deeper: "*It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today*" (v21). This is a brilliant move. Not only does it divide his Jewish opponents (22:22–29) and give him a context to preach the gospel to his Roman audience, but it also identifies the key reason why he is inviting the Gentiles in the first place. Jesus is alive, and Lord of the whole world, and every nation within it. Not just Israel.

CAPITALS MATTER!

Saturday 24 March

• ACTS 24:22-25:12 •

It seems like Paul's momentum has stalled. Having been a successful church planting missionary across the eastern Mediterranean, he is now holed up in prison for two years, for no particular reason – it is just that nobody is quite sure what to do with him. In that context, his *"appeal to Caesar"* (25:10–12) looks like mere legal wrangling, with Paul trying to make the best of Roman bureaucracy in overdrive. In fact, it marks the moment when Paul's long-held desire to visit Rome begins to be realised.

This is important, partly because it reflects Paul's desire to reach the capital of the world (Rome was the ancient equivalent of New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris and Tokyo all at once), and partly because it points to the continued, worldwide spread of the gospel. Jesus, remember, had said the gospel would be "preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (Matthew 24:14), and Paul was "eager to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome" (Romans 1:15). In appealing to Caesar, Paul starts a ball rolling that will ultimately culminate in his death – but it will also lead to his preaching the gospel in the eternal city, and eventually reaching the ends of the earth.

Notes

There is a feast, a great celebration coming which motivates us to celebrate our diversity now and invite many others to the table. The relationships, the meals we share here on earth are a foretaste of the meal of all meals, the feast of all feasts, the celebration of all celebrations!

Acts ends with Paul welcoming many into his home and sharing the gospel even though he is a prisoner (Acts 28:28–31). Everyone is welcome at the table (Rev 7:9–12), there is a call to evangelise the world (Rev 14:6) and the great invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

Paul reaches out and invites people in even though his circumstances are very limited – how have you done in inviting someone for a coffee or a meal over the series? It's not too late to get inviting!

What do you think worship in heaven will be like? What do you think that feast will be like in the eternal kingdom of God? Give thanks that you have been invited!

PRAYER TOPICS

Lord, thank you for meeting with me on the journey of my life. Help me to keep talking about You and Your grace wherever I go today. *Amen*

Lord, help me find ways to intentionally invite people to find out more about Jesus. Even if I feel I don't have many resources, give me ideas as to how I can do this, remembering how Paul kept inviting others in even when he was in jail! *Amen*

Lord, help me welcome others into my life, my home – to sit at my table. Let me embrace diversity and celebrate the way You are building Your Church with all kinds of people. Lord, I long for the day when every kind of people will be included in Your Church in a way that truly reflects Your kingdom in heaven. *Amen*

KIDS/FAMILY DEVOTIONAL

DISCUSS

After reading the Scripture, discuss who we can invite to come to church at Easter.

READ ACTS 28:28-31

PRAY

Pray for friends you'd like to invite to church. Thank God that everyone is welcome in His house, the Church.

ACTIVITY

Design and make your own invitation for a friend to come to church. Then invite them along!

ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE ARE INVITED IN

Sunday 25 March

● ACTS 25:13-27 ●

We have seen the diversity of the gospel's reach throughout Acts, but most of our attention has been on ethnic diversity between Jews and Gentiles. Less noticed, but equally impressive, is the social and economic range of people reached by the gospel. Widows, slaves, crippled beggars and peasant villagers respond to the gospel, yet at the same time, we see the apostles preaching to merchants, council members, commanders and governors. In today's text, Paul gets a hearing with Agrippa the king, a descendant of Herod the Great, and his wife Bernice. What he never achieved while travelling freely, he has managed while imprisoned.

It's worth reflecting on how he does it. Paul's message is of course hugely challenging to worldly power: the idea that "*there is a dead man named Jesus whom Paul claimed was alive*" (v19) poses a problem to all imperial authority and worldly government. But Paul has conducted himself so wisely and winsomely that even Festus, the governor (the equivalent of Pontius Pilate), concludes, "*I found he had done nothing deserving of death*" (v25). His message is deeply controversial, but you can't argue with his righteousness. If we're looking to reach powerful people today, there's a lesson in there somewhere.

Notes

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ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE

Monday 26 March

• ACTS 26:1-11 •

Of the many impressive things about Paul, one of the most remarkable is this: he never jettisons his Jewishness in order to reach Gentiles. In inviting the outsiders, he never stops being an insider. He remains himself, and continues to identify with his background, even as he works hard to *"become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some"* (1 Corinthians 9:22). Here, as he begins his defence to Agrippa and Festus, he mentions his Jewish heritage in almost every verse.

"You are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies" (v3). "The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child" (v4). "I lived as a Pharisee" (v5). "What God has promised our fathers" (v6). "Our twelve tribes" (v7). "On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison" (v10). "I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished" (v11). It can sometimes seem that, in order to reach new people, we have to somehow abandon our history and act as if we are not from a particular context or culture. Paul doesn't. He recognises it, celebrates what was good, repents of what was bad, and then crosses boundaries to reach those who are different.

MISSION TO THE WHOLE WORLD

Tuesday 27 March

● ACTS 26:12-32 ●

This is now the third time we have heard about Paul's conversion, and each time there is a different note to it. As Paul tells the story to Agrippa, notice how he shows the international, global scope of what God has done through Christ. "I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God…" (v19–20). That, he explains, is why the Jews tried to kill him (21), but "I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles" (v22–23).

Paul's biblical rationale for building an international Church is so strong that he even wants Agrippa and Festus to see it. When Festus says he's mad, and Agrippa asks if he thinks he can convert him, Paul answers simply that he prays that they "*may become what I am, except for these chains*" (v29). His hope for people is not just conversion, but unconstrained mission. Like Paul, but without the chains.

Notes

WE WORK AND GOD WORKS

Wednesday 28 March

• ACTS 27:1-38 •

The story of the shipwreck is a remarkable piece of ancient history, which tells us an awful lot about Mediterranean geography and seafaring. But it is also a remarkable piece of theology, which tells us an awful lot about how Paul approached his apostolic mission. A number of themes we have seen before reappear here: the mixture of 'Sense, Scripture and the Spirit'; an angel who reassures Paul that his mission will succeed; the insistence that he will reach Rome and stand before Caesar; and so on. There is also a fascinating way of thinking about the relationship between God's sovereignty and our responsibility in salvation.

An angel speaks to Paul and tells him that the lives of everyone on the ship will be saved (v23–26). Yet a while later, Paul tells the centurion, "*Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved*" (v31). What is going on? Will they be saved because God has promised it, or because they listen to Paul's warnings? And the answer is: both. They work, and God works. They must respond in faith, and so they do – and when they do, it's grounded in God's prior decision to save them. It's the same for us.

Notes

ROME: CAPITAL OF THE KNOWN WORLD

Thursday 29 March

• ACTS 27:39-28:16 •

"And so we came to Rome" (28:14). It has been a long, drawn-out journey from the mountain outside Jerusalem, where Jesus first said the disciples would be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth", to Paul's final arrival in the capital of the world. Even in today's text, we see rescues from a shipwreck (27:39–44), a snake-bite (28:1–6), dysentery (v7–8), and healing of every sickness on the island of Malta (v9), before reaching Rome. Like readers of any epic story as it reaches its end point, we breathe a sigh of relief: he has made it.

If you go to Rome today, you can see the revolutionary power of the gospel in the very buildings. In a two mile walk from southeast to northwest, you can stroll from the Colosseum, where Christians were literally thrown to the lions for entertainment, to the Vatican, where Michaelangelo painted the Christian story on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. It is an amazing transformation, and it came about through Paul, Priscilla and Aquila, and dozens of their co-workers whom nobody has ever heard of. The gospel was always intended to reach the ends of the earth, and through the story told in Acts, it did.

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INVITE

WELCOMING ALL

Week 7

Friday 30 March

● ACTS 28:17-31 ●

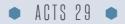
The conclusion of Acts is both triumphant and bittersweet. Triumphant because, as we have seen, the gospel reached Rome and eventually transformed it (within 250 years, the emperor had become a believer, and around 40% of the empire was Christian). Yet bittersweet because, despite the growth, the key passion of many of the apostles – that the Jews would respond en masse and follow Jesus – has not been fulfilled. That's how Paul's story concludes.

So, from now on, "God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen" (v28). Israel's rejection of the gospel has made its growth among the Gentiles possible. Many Jews have rejected the invitation God has sent to them, and so, like Jesus' parable of the wedding feast (Luke 14:15–24), the invitations are sent to others, wherever they're from: Rome, or Spain, or Timbuktu, or even High Wycombe. So Paul closes out the story welcoming "all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." (v30–31). It is a fitting end to the book: an apostle inviting Gentiles and Jews, Greeks and Romans, into his home to talk about the gospel.

Notes

WELCOME ONE ANOTHER

Saturday 31 March



Acts doesn't really have a proper ending. Many Christians see this as significant: the mission of the Church, through the word, by the Spirit, is not finished. There are still over 6,000 people groups who are considered unreached with the gospel. The great commission is not yet done.

But there is hope. If you turn the page at the end of Acts 28, hoping for Acts 29, you find yourself in the letter Paul wrote to the church in Rome. Romans is Paul's pitch for missionary participation: he wants to reach the "barbarians/ non-Greeks" in Spain, and for that, he needs help. So he works hard to persuade them that God does not favour any one nation over any other – for the Jew first, and also for the Greek – and that as a result, those who have recently been invited in should support Paul in inviting those who have not yet heard. "*I am bound both to Greeks and non-Greeks,*" he explains (1:14). "*How can they hear without someone preaching to them?*" (10:14). "*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you*" (15:7). Every nation is to be welcomed in to the giant international family that God is building.

In Christ Jesus, everyone is invited.

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The King's Centre, Desborough Road High Wycombe, Bucks, HP11 2PU

01494 459 901 • office@kchw.co.uk • www.kchw.co.uk