



SCRIPTURE SHARED  
**UNSTOPPABLE**  
THE BOOK OF ACTS

## Week 3: Persecution

### Week 3, Day 1 – The Council and Persecution

#### Acts 4:1-22

*<sup>1</sup> While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, <sup>2</sup> much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. <sup>3</sup> So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. <sup>4</sup> But many of those who heard the word believed, and they numbered about five thousand.*

*<sup>5</sup> The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, <sup>6</sup> with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. <sup>7</sup> When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” <sup>8</sup> Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, <sup>9</sup> if we are being questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are being asked how this man has been healed, <sup>10</sup> let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. <sup>11</sup> This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’*

*<sup>12</sup> “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” <sup>13</sup> Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. <sup>14</sup> When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. <sup>15</sup> So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. <sup>16</sup> They said, “What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup> But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” <sup>18</sup> So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup> But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; <sup>20</sup> for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” <sup>21</sup> After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. <sup>22</sup> For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.*

### **Understanding the Passage:**

There's a danger in sharing the good news about Jesus. Peter and John's proclamation of the gospel drew out the religious powers as an audience, and they didn't like what they heard.

At this point, the message about Jesus and his resurrection has spread relentlessly across the Near East and is making its way all over the world. That's the danger the religious authorities see in this new sect: not only is the content of its proclamation strange, it's contagious. Additionally, the religious authorities are most scandalized by the healing power this message seems to have. The outsiders of society are being told that they belong in this new family *and* they are invited to new life – a life free from their ailments that kept them marginalized. This is something the religious authorities were never able to offer the sick, and this threatens the hold the priests have.

The power that Peter and John possess is no magic trick, and it's not making trouble for the sake of making trouble. We're told that simple proximity to the life and power of Jesus is life changing. People are shocked that these uneducated working-class men are somehow filled with miraculous power. That miraculous power overwhelms its hearers, and it overwhelms Peter and John, too. They say they can't stop sharing the news about Jesus, even if they tried. The religious leaders make a gamble: if this power is of human origin, then they have nothing to worry about. What we know now as modern-day Jesus followers is that their bet was bust.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. Does telling others about Jesus feel compulsory? Do you feel, like John and Peter, that you couldn't stop even if you were forced to?
2. Is proclaiming the resurrection of the dead dangerous today? In what way? And dangerous to whom?
3. What impact does it have that Peter makes direct connections between the Psalms and the life of Jesus (Ps. 118)? What does it tell us about the faith and practice of the early Jesus followers?

### **Week 3, Day 2 – Stephen**

#### **Acts 6:8-7:1**

*<sup>8</sup> Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." <sup>12</sup> They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. <sup>13</sup> They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us." <sup>15</sup> And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

*<sup>1</sup> Then the high priest asked him, "Are these things so?"*

### **Understanding the Passage:**

This crowd of people argues with Stephen, even in the face of the great wonders he performs. They conspire to slander him – “this man who claims to be from God speaks ill of one of God’s prophets.” They claim that Stephen is badmouthing Moses, a hero and important figure to this community.

Stephen’s response models a compelling defense of the Christian faith. He doesn’t simply say, “no, I love Moses.” Stephen recounts the entire history of God’s faithfulness to God’s people, Israel. From Abraham, to Joseph, to Moses, to Aaron, to Joshua, to David, and the prophets. He connects these slanderers’ histories to Jesus. Likewise, Stephen roots himself in the life of Jesus. He makes a winsome move by drawing attention to a story they all knew and making its clear connection with the life of Jesus.

You reject Jesus, Stephen claims, because you reject the God that Jesus embodies. This is insulting to them! Imagine spending your whole life hearing this story only to be told you got the ending wrong. They’re so insulted by Stephen’s long-winded speech that they put him to death.

Stephen is depicted heroically here. He stood his ground in the face of a conspiracy against him. He told the story of Israel that points to Jesus. He sees Jesus standing above him in approval and welcome. At the same time, we get an establishing shot of an assumed villain. Saul stands in approval, not of Stephen, but of Stephen’s death.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. Have you ever felt misrepresented as Stephen is here? How did you respond? How does Stephen model a Christian response?
2. What does it mean that Stephen’s face is like an angel? What does this tell us about how even naysayers see this new religious movement?
3. Why was execution the response for Stephen’s action? What law or custom did he seemingly break?

### **Week 3, Day 3 – Saul’s Conversion**

#### **Acts 8:1-4 and 9:1-22**

*<sup>1</sup> And Saul approved of their killing him.*

*That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.<sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.*

*<sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went from place to place proclaiming the word.*

*<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” <sup>5</sup> He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see*

*nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank.*

*<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." <sup>11</sup> The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup> and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; <sup>16</sup> I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." <sup>17</sup> So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

*For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,<sup>20</sup> and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." <sup>21</sup> All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" <sup>22</sup> Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.*

### **Understanding the Passage:**

Fresh off his approval of the execution of Stephen, we find Saul on the move. He won't rest until this dangerous religious movement that blasphemes the God of Israel is stamped out. On his way to his next assignment in Damascus, he meets Jesus. We typically use that phrase when talking about someone who has a dramatic encounter with God or when they die. This is one such occasion. Saul's mission is interrupted by a voice and a light. He's knocked from his horse – certainly on his way to death, he imagines.

This voice, who we learn is the risen Jesus, doesn't say, "why are you killing my followers?" He says, "why are you persecuting *me*?" Here we have echoes of Jesus' own words when he walked the earth gathering disciples – "whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me." Saul's mission isn't against a movement of religious fanatics. His mission is against a person and that person just happens to be God. Not a fair fight.

Jesus blinds Saul and gives him traveling instructions to continue his journey to Damascus and wait. Meanwhile, Jesus talks with Ananias and instructs him to find Saul, lay hands on him, and welcome him into the family. Remember, when we first meet Saul he's standing over the recently stoned body of Stephen. Stephen boldly proclaimed the message of Jesus, was murdered for it, and the one who oversaw that murder is now welcomed into the Jesus movement as one of its leaders! He gathers his strength and sight and continues the work of the man he had killed. He declares that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Have you had a radical encounter with God? What was it like? If not God, have you ever been dramatically interrupted by someone? How did it make you feel? What was your response?
2. Does it make sense that Jesus connects the persecution of his followers with the persecution of him specifically? How does that connection work? Does that still apply today?
3. What does it tell you about Jesus that he chooses his followers' enemies into this new Jesus movement?

### Week 3, Day 4 – Peter's Report to the Church at Jerusalem

#### Acts 11:1-29

*<sup>1</sup> Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, <sup>3</sup> saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" <sup>4</sup> Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, <sup>5</sup> "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me. <sup>6</sup> As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup> I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' <sup>8</sup> But I replied, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' <sup>9</sup> But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' <sup>10</sup> This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. <sup>11</sup> At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. <sup>12</sup> The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. <sup>13</sup> He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; <sup>14</sup> he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' <sup>15</sup> And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>17</sup> If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" <sup>18</sup> When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life."*

*<sup>19</sup> Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. <sup>20</sup> But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. <sup>22</sup> News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion, <sup>24</sup> for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. <sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he had found him he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians."*

*<sup>27</sup> At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world, and this took place during the reign of Claudius. <sup>29</sup> The disciples determined that, according to their ability, each would send relief to the brothers and sisters living in Judea;*

### **Understanding the Passage:**

It had really been God's plan all along to include Gentiles in his rescue mission. Even as far back as Abraham, God explicitly invites Abraham to use his life to bless the lives of all nations (Gen. 22:18). Even so, Jesus' followers in Jerusalem aren't happy with Peter. Peter had been eating with Gentiles; specifically, Peter had been eating with people who weren't circumcised. These people weren't ritually clean. The news hasn't quite made its way around – what had previously been considered clean is now clean. No more obstacles for the Gentiles. No purity law gatekeeping.

Peter recounts this dream he's had where animals that Jewish people didn't traditionally eat come down from heaven cradled in a sheet. A voice declares that these unclean things are now clean – they're on the menu! Through Peter's recounting to the church at Jerusalem, we're to understand that this generally applies. That is, it doesn't just apply to what's for dinner. It extends to the cleanliness and belonging of the Gentiles. According to Peter's dream and his subsequent proclamation, God is absolutely determined to rescue the world – the *whole* world. He recalls that Jesus brought people in through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is pursuing all people regardless of their dietary practices or circumcision status.

From here, Barnabas is sent to check on the church in Antioch and likes what he finds! The encourages their faith. He extends his greetings. And here, we're told, Jesus' followers are called Christians for the first time. These people have a few distinguishing marks, and to give them a name is to group them based on these marks. They're sent people. They're scattered people. They're brave people. The Methodist movement was categorized the same way – the name came originally as an insult. John Wesley, however, adopted it as descriptive of the people he was seeking to encourage. We're in a long line of people worth imitating.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. Are there people we've excluded (from our families, communities, churches) whom God wants to include? How do we make that invitation? How do we know?
2. What religious barriers do we put up that prevent us from deep relationships with others?
3. How are Christians characterized now that we can adopt as helpful descriptors? In what ways are we characterized that we should resist/counteract?

## **Week 3, Day 5 – Paul's Report of His Conversion**

### **Acts 26:12-32**

*<sup>12</sup> "With this in mind, I was traveling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, <sup>13</sup> when at midday along the road, Your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. <sup>14</sup> When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.' <sup>15</sup> I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. <sup>16</sup> But get up and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. <sup>17</sup> I will rescue you from your people and from the gentiles—to whom I am sending you <sup>18</sup> to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'*

*19 "After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision 20 but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance. 21 For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 To this day I have had help from God, and so I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place: 23 that the Messiah must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the gentiles."*

*24 While he was making this defense, Festus exclaimed, "You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!" 25 But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth. 26 Indeed, the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely, for I am certain that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." 28 Agrippa said to Paul, "Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?" 29 Paul replied, "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains."*

*30 Then the king got up and with him the governor and Bernice and those who had been seated with them, 31 and as they were leaving they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." 32 Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor."*

### **Understanding the Passage:**

Hold on a second. We've heard this story before, but not like this. All the way back in Chapter 9, the narrator of Acts tells the story of Paul's conversion. Paul tells it in Chapter 22. And now Paul tells it again to Agrippa with some detailed differences. Here, Jesus is more verbose with Paul. First, Paul tells us that not only did he hear the voice of Jesus, but that Jesus was speaking Hebrew! This is a new detail but adds credibility to Paul's Jewishness and his connection to the Jewish messiah.

Second, Jesus says, "it hurts you to kick against the goads." The King James version of the text maintains this odd phrase in 9:5, but it is only found here in the modern translations given its manuscript evidence. That aside, what in the world does it mean? Apparently, this was a common phrase – an ancient Greek proverb said by the Jewish messiah in Hebrew to the prime persecutor of this new religious movement. The proverb describes the coaxing of an ox with a *goad* – a thorny piece attached to a shoe or stick that one would use to direct oxen. A modern analogue would be something like a spur. Here, Jesus is essentially saying, "when you go against the grain of the universe, you get splinters." That is, *don't try to resist what God is trying to do in your life, or it'll hurt.*

This bolsters Paul's case in front of Agrippa. Paul can't possibly go against this radical new call on his life. He stands bravely before Agrippa as one who would be wise to step into what God has invited him into through Jesus. Paul extends a similar invitation to Agrippa. He presses him to confess his belief in the prophets so he can make his case that they spoke of Jesus beforehand. Don't kick against the goads, Agrippa! Paul says he wants Agrippa and those in earshot to all follow Jesus, in their own time. He wants his hearers to have the same experience as him, minus his imprisonment. One can read this as Paul pleading with Agrippa for release – that they could all follow Jesus, pack up, and call it a day. No such conversion happens, but Paul is spared from execution.

**Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. Have you ever felt you were going against the grain of what God wanted you to do or be? How did you course correct?
2. Do you ever feel, as Paul is accused, that you're a "madman" for following Jesus? What "sober truth" keeps you connected to God as Paul is?
3. How might you change a story to appeal to a different audience? What impact does emphasizing different details have? How might you apply this to sharing your faith story?

**Week 1 Group Discussion Questions:**

1. How are you drawing the circle wider, as Pastor David described, by extending God's grace to everyone and trying to draw them all into the inclusivity of Christianity?
2. The apostles were forthright and clear in their beliefs. Are you as clear in your beliefs and the way you communicate them with others?
3. Acts presents Christians with an opportunity to talk about the exclusivity of what Christ offers. How do you answer questions about exclusivism?
4. A frequent charge against the apostles is that they are *crazy* or *madmen*. How can we be bold and zealous without being perceived as crazy? Can we be passionate without being fanatical? How do you strike that balance?
5. Do you believe miracles still happen today?
6. The apostles often quote from the Hebrew Bible (particularly Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and the major prophets). What does this teach us about how *we* read the Old Testament? What can we learn about the continuity between the God of Israel and the God of Jesus? Do we use the Old Testament differently now that Jesus has come?
7. At the end of the video, Pastor Colin talked about how surprising it is that Saul / Paul went from standing over Stephen as he was martyred to being one of the most important evangelists for Christianity. How do you use your past to share with other people the work that God has done in your life?

**Prayer requests and other notes.**