

CROSSINGS WOMEN TEACHING TEAM

acts:

LIFE IN THE

HOLY
SPIRIT

TAYLOR RAUSCHKOLB

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 **CROSSINGS**
COMMUNITY CHURCH
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hello, Friend!

I'm so glad you're joining me for this study of *Acts: Life in the Holy Spirit*. The book of Acts shows us what can happen when ordinary people are convinced that the extraordinary Spirit of God has been given to them. As biblical scholar Craig Keener wrote, Acts doesn't allow believers in Jesus to "settle for a purely intellectual examination of faith," but "invites us to also experience God's power in and through us" (Keener, 167). The men and women of Acts put on display what life surrendered to Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit can **actually look like** in practice.

That's why one of the best things we'll do together in the coming weeks is ... **practice**! The group sessions and workbook have been designed to help you engage deeply with the book of Acts in a variety of ways, including some experiential ones! My hope is that our time together will not simply **inform** you about the Holy Spirit, but **invite** you to encounter him personally. Instead of zooming quickly through every chapter and verse of Acts, our goal will be to allow the Spirit and his Scriptures to saturate our lives.

Before we jump in, there are a few notes about what to expect from *Acts: Life in the Holy Spirit*.

PRAYER

If you are like me, even Bible study can become just another item on the daily to-do list; I find beginning with a simple prayer allows my scattered and anxious thoughts to settle. Each day's homework begins with a short prayer of approach. The goal of our time together is communion with God, and that starts with opening ourselves up to him! It may be helpful for you to take a few slow, deep breaths, place your hand on your heart, or relax your shoulders and jaw. Then say the prayer aloud, or repeat it to yourself. Lighting a candle may be another way to set this time apart each day.

WORKBOOK + JOURNAL

Each week's content includes four days with Bible readings, some devotional thoughts from me, and a journaling prompt or two. I recommend picking up an inexpensive notebook to journal in. (I love a good ol' composition notebook!) Space for journaling is not included in your workbook because I didn't want you to feel pressure to write a set amount. Some days, the journaling prompts may resonate with you, and you'll want plenty of space to process. Other times, you'll be able to sum up your thoughts succinctly. You don't have to do all the prompts, either; the point is to let the Holy Spirit connect what you've read with what he wants to say to you. Make every effort to be as honest as you can before God. You'll never be required to share anything you record at group time. (A separate journal also adds a layer of privacy, since you may have your workbooks open when we gather together.)

ENTERING THE STORY

Each week's content also includes one day with a suggested Spirit-led practice I've called "Entering the Story." These activities are ways you can practically weave the themes of Acts into your life. They can be done at any time between our group sessions, but since some of them may require some prior planning, it's a good idea to check these out in advance of the week.

GROUP SESSIONS

There are three "layers" to *Acts: Life in the Spirit*: large group teaching sessions, small group sessions, and individual workbook time. That means two-thirds of your experience will occur in our weekly gathering! The teaching sessions will set up each week's readings, but the small group time will be more than just discussion; we're going to **do stuff!** You will not want to miss a moment of our group time together, whether or not you complete all of the workbook assignments.

As we step into their stories over the coming weeks, I expect that the men and women of Acts—and the Spirit who filled them to overflowing—will captivate your heart, as they have mine. The Holy Spirit has so much in store for us!

WEEK 1

the Gift

“WAIT FOR THE GIFT MY FATHER PROMISED, WHICH
YOU HAVE HEARD ME SPEAK ABOUT.”

ACTS 1:4, NIV

Many people have some wariness when it comes to the Holy Spirit. I know I used to! I was afraid if I sought out the things of the Spirit, I'd get, well, weird.

So, I tried really hard to be a good Christian, for a really long time. And here's what I found: it doesn't work without the Spirit. The eternal, abundant life Jesus called us to isn't about trying hard. It's about trusting that the mission God gives believers can only be accomplished by his means: the power and presence of the Holy Spirit within us. And we see that reality in full color on the pages of the book of Acts. And y'all, fair warning: some of it is pretty weird.

That's why, for our first week in *Acts: Life in the Holy Spirit*, we will begin with Jesus. Let's anchor ourselves in what Jesus had to say about the Holy Spirit and discover how he instructed his followers in the days before his ascension. If anyone has reliable information about life in the Holy Spirit, it's Jesus!

What do you say? Let's get weird—or at least, as weird as Jesus wants us to be.

THERE'S MORE!

day 1

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Jesus, thank you for the gift of your Spirit;
quench my thirst for more of you.

READ ACTS 1:1-8.

As you read, note everything Jesus says to
his disciples about the Holy Spirit.

One Christmas Day, after the festive remains of the morning had been cleared away, I spied a pair of small legs poking out from under the tree. My son Charlie lay spread-eagle on the tree skirt, reaching around the trunk and peering into the lower branches.

"Whatcha doing there, bud?" I asked.

"Oh, just checking to see if there's anything more."

Acts opens with Jesus's instruction: *wait for the Gift my Father promised*. The Holy Spirit, poured out on Pentecost, is promised to all who entrust themselves to Jesus. Scripture instructs us to walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16), to bear the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), to pray in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:18), and to fan into flame the various gifts of the Spirit (2 Timothy 1:6). He's the one who births new and eternal life in us (John 3:5-8) and who renews us (Titus 3:5). God's people are expected to live by God's Spirit. And yet, what we see in the Bible and what we actually *experience* of God's presence and power today tends to vary ... a lot. As we journey through Acts, we will find a gap between the story the Bible tells and how most Christians usually live.

I could try to explain that tension away. But what if that gap is a gift? What if it beckons us "under the tree" to discover a greater fullness of God's promised Spirit? We may just find that *there is more* to him than we have previously settled for.

What if experiencing the power of Holy Spirit is more than a feeling that comes and goes?

What if hearing from God isn't just for certain "anointed" Christians?

What if Jesus is calling me to something more than trying really hard to be good?

Jesus described life in the Holy Spirit as a flow of living water within us. Our thirst for more is what draws us to Jesus, so we can receive that life (John 7:37-39). In our text today, you read that from the very beginning of Christianity, there was zero expectation of carrying out the mission of God alone. Jesus was not disappointed that the disciples couldn't do it or that they required more from him after his ascension. Rather, Jesus seems absolutely delighted to keep his Father's promise. *Just you wait*, Jesus seems to imply. *He's coming! There's more. I promise!*

JOURNALING PROMPT:

Choose one or both to respond to in a separate notebook.

Depending on your church background, you may not be accustomed to much teaching on the Holy Spirit. It's totally okay to feel a little unsure. Spend some time journaling about your experience (or lack of experience) with the Holy Spirit. What are some hopes or fears you have coming in to a study like this?

Do you feel a gap between what Scripture says and what you experience? How do you normally handle that tension? What if the Lord is inviting you into more?

THE HELPER

day 2

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Jesus, thank you for the gift of your Spirit.
Holy Spirit, you are the help I need.

READ JOHN 14:12-16:15.

Note how Jesus describes the character and actions of the Holy Spirit.

Our text today contains some of Jesus's most concise teaching on the Holy Spirit. Some of it is downright shocking. Jesus told his disciples they would do greater things than he did. He invites his disciples to ask the Father for **anything** in his name. He even declared that it's better for him to go away so the Holy Spirit would come (John 14:12, 15:16, 16:7). Believing that any gift could be better than living side-by-side with Jesus is hard to grasp. There are days I think: If only I could meet Jesus for coffee and just talk it all out ... if only I could just see his face ... if only I could just take hold of his hand and let him lead me ... wouldn't life would be so much **better**?

The departure Jesus spoke of was his impending death, so of course it is better for us in that sense; it was a matter of eternity! But Jesus wasn't just talking about life after death; he was preparing his disciples for their life on Earth after his death. Jesus taught that the Spirit's presence would be of more benefit to his followers than his own.

The question is, do we dare believe him?

Have you ever read the same verse in multiple Bibles and noticed that one of the words was translated lots of different ways? When that happens, it's usually because the meaning can't be captured by a single English word. Jesus calls the Holy Spirit by a special name in our text today: **Parakletos**. This special title has been translated Helper (NASB), Counselor (CSB), Advocate (NIV), and Comforter (KJV). From the Greek *kaleo*, to call, and *para*, alongside, the most literal definition of **Parakletos** is "one who has been

called alongside." The only other time in Scripture that **Parakletos** shows up, it refers to Jesus himself (1 John 2:1). Jesus is comforting his disciples with the promise, not of a disembodied force, but of **another** Person who will come alongside them. We may not be able to look into his eyes from across a table like the disciples did with Jesus, but the Holy Spirit is a Person, one who will do what Jesus did. He will teach them, empower them for a faithful, fruitful life, and draw them into greater fellowship with God the Father, Son, and Spirit, even in the midst of trials and opposition.

The Holy Spirit will pick right up where Jesus left off—but he won't have any of the human limitations Jesus subjected himself to in his incarnation. **Everything** Jesus did was according to the will of the Father and by the power of the Holy Spirit. By that same Helper, all disciples of Jesus can be equipped to do the kinds of things he himself has done.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

Look over the list about the Spirit you made from John 14-16. Did something about the **Parakletos** resonate with you? Ask God to show you why that stood out to you and whether he has more to reveal to you.

LET IT REIGN

day 3

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Jesus, may your kingdom come, and may it reign in me today.

READ ACTS 1:1-11 AND LUKE 24:36-49.

Note what Jesus spent time teaching his disciples during the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension.

My in-laws both passed away a few years ago. After Bill's diagnosis, he didn't feel up to doing odd jobs around our house anymore (which had been his favorite hobby), but he noticed that our growing family was outpacing our washer and dryer. So, one day he showed up with a huge smile and a delivery truck! When Leslie was in her final days, she also prioritized loving us by dictating encouraging letters to each member of her family.

Knowing that the end is near has a way of adding extra gravity to people's words and actions, doesn't it? Bill and Leslie found ways to love us and prepare us for when they were gone. Jesus did the same for his apostles. For 40 days, he demonstrated his resurrection, opened the Scriptures, and taught about the kingdom of God.

Prophecies of God's kingdom are woven throughout the Old Testament. Acts is full of the apostle's sermons, and they draw on these Scriptures—the very ones Jesus opened their minds to understand—to demonstrate Jesus was the Messiah and his kingdom had come. When Jesus rose from the dead, he brought the future kingdom reign of God into the present moment. God's kingdom, as summarized by Dallas Willard, is the range of his effective will, where what God wants done is done (Willard, 25). In Acts, the people of God proclaim the invasion of his kingdom: by the authority of King Jesus, they perform signs and wonders, and in submission to King Jesus, they create a community marked by self-giving love, generosity, and unity. And the Spirit of God empowers it all.

After he was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism, Jesus began his ministry. And the very first things he did were to *declare the kingdom* and *fulfill Scripture* (Mark 1:7-15, Luke 4:14-21). You see, Jesus doesn't call us to follow him anywhere he has not first blazed a Spirit-soaked trail. No wonder he told the disciples to wait for the Spirit's anointing before bearing witness to the good news: it's what he did!

Only hours before she passed into the presence of King Jesus, my mother-in-law wrote these words to me: *"Don't forget the benefits of following Christ as a child of God in his kingdom ... See you soon, but not too soon."* Perhaps something similar was on the heart of Jesus as he left his faith-family behind to go to the Father: *See you soon, but not too soon.*

My friend, don't forget the benefits promised to you as God's child in his kingdom. The Spirit who anointed Jesus is in you, too. The kingdom is here. Let it reign!

JOURNALING PROMPT:

Is your life a place where the kingdom of God rules and reigns? Write an honest assessment, asking the Spirit to reveal any "holdouts" in your heart. What, or who, is actually ruling your life? Surrender those parts of yourself to God, and ask the Spirit to come fill any empty spaces.

WORTH THE WAIT

day 4

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Jesus, thank you for the promise of your Spirit.
Help me learn to wait on you.

TURN ONCE MORE TO ACTS 1.

This time, read verses 1-14. When you think about Jesus's instruction to wait, notice any emotions that rise in you.

Whenever my teen sons get excited about something, they leap up and shout: "Bro, let's GOOOO!" So maybe it's the sheer amount of testosterone in my house, but I can't help imagining fist-pumping, back-thumping enthusiasm from Jesus's inner circle when he ascended into Heaven. They, along with the brothers and sisters gathered back in Jerusalem, will be sent out as agents of God's redemption of the world. "Let's GOOOO and make disciples of all nations!" (That's Matthew 28:19, teen edition.)

After receiving such a magnificent game plan, I also have to wonder how it felt for Jesus's "bros" to follow step one: *Before you go, stay. Before you witness, wait.*

Waiting has always been a way God teaches people to trust him. The apostles, living under Roman rule, knew the prophecies about liberation and the Spirit's arrival (Jeremiah 16:15, Ezekial 37:21-22). In Acts 1:6, they basically asked Jesus, "What's the timeline?" They wanted clarity, they wanted action steps. But God's plan went beyond restoring Israel—he was opening the kingdom to *all* who would believe. God is always doing more than we can understand in the moment. When you are in a season of waiting, surrender to the not-knowing. Let God do his work in you to prepare you for what he's planned.

So what did the apostles do as they waited for what the Father had promised? They prayed! Prayer—especially group prayer—is mentioned more than 30 times in Acts. The modern church has strayed from its prayerful roots. Like

waiting, prayer feels like inaction. It feels vulnerable and inefficient. I think that's probably the whole point. Embracing our lack of control reminds us that God's call on our lives isn't about what we can do. Think about it: the disciples were already "witnesses" *before* the Spirit came. They'd walked with Jesus for years. They'd heard him teach. They'd even healed people! Peter definitely had leadership skills—he could have put together a pretty great speaking ministry. He'd probably go viral on social media. The Lord's command to wait was a clear signal: the kingdom is not about human effort.

By waiting in prayer, we embody the truth: we need God. Jesus's most consistent teaching on prayer was to ask boldly and honestly, like children of a loving Father. Listen to what Jesus said in Luke 11:13: "If you ... know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give *the Holy Spirit* to those who ask him?"

What if the answer to every prayer is found in God himself, the Holy Spirit?

Then I'd say he's worth the wait. *Let's GOOOO!*

JOURNALING PROMPT:

What are you waiting on God for right now? Write out your prayer. How might the Holy Spirit be an answer to your prayer?

day 5

WAITING

WAIT FOR THE GIFT MY FATHER PROMISED, WHICH YOU HAVE HEARD ME SPEAK ABOUT. FOR JOHN BAPTIZED WITH WATER, BUT IN A FEW DAYS YOU WILL BE BAPTIZED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.

ACTS 1:4-5

THEREFORE THE LORD WAITS TO BE GRACIOUS TO YOU, AND THEREFORE HE EXALTS HIMSELF TO SHOW MERCY TO YOU. FOR THE LORD IS A GOD OF JUSTICE; BLESSED ARE ALL THOSE WHO WAIT FOR HIM.

ISAIAH 30:18, ESV

Every week on Day 5, I'll offer you an invitation to get practical with something we've covered in our workbooks. This week, I'm inviting you to get creative with inconvenience. Below you'll find some examples of ways to embrace waiting as a spiritual practice. Remember, spiritual practices are just that—practice. Learning to walk with the Spirit often begins with baby steps.

You may already have experienced prolonged seasons of waiting, possibly even through great suffering. Learning to trust God's promises and plans when he isn't moving on our timetable is not for the faint of heart. It's good to make space to grieve our upset plans and unmet desires. Spiritual practices can help strengthen our "faith muscles" and build endurance for future seasons of waiting on the Lord.

IDEAS FOR PRACTICING WAITING:

Choose inconvenience. If you are running errands this week, choose the longest checkout line on purpose. If you usually use an app to order ahead, don't do that this week.

Go slowly. If you have someone in your life who walks more slowly than you do (like a small child or elderly relative), match their pace. Resist any urge to hurry them along.

Arrive early. Build in extra margin and show up 10-15 minutes earlier than usual for carpool or appointments, so you can wait longer than normal.

Here's the biggie: Avoid using your smartphone or another distraction to fill any time you spend waiting.

As you embrace small inconveniences, take notice of any thoughts or feelings that rise up in you. Do you think critically of people for moving slowly or inefficiently? Do you constantly check the clock or wish people would hurry up? Do you feel impatient or anxious as you wait? Do you instinctively reach for a smart phone or other distraction to avoid feeling awkward or bored? Don't beat yourself up for these reactions. Just recognize them, and ask the Lord what he wants you to understand about these emotional responses.

Choose to use the waiting time as praying time. Sometimes it can help to use "breath prayers," which are simple statements we can say as we breathe in and out. I've crafted a few based on the study and Scripture, but feel free to create your own!

Breathe in: *Holy Spirit, I wait for you.*

Breathe out: *You are the answer to every prayer.*

Breathe in: *How long, oh Lord?*

Breathe out: *It is not for me to know.*

Breathe in: *You wait to be gracious to me.*

Breathe out: *Blessed are all who wait for him (Isaiah 30:18, ESV).*

REFLECTION:

At the end of your chosen inconvenience, record some thoughts in your journal about the experience. How did it feel to wait? If you embraced waiting throughout the week, did your resistance to the practice change at all? Ask the Holy Spirit where the root of any resistance to waiting might be. The next time you come upon an unexpected wait, remember what God showed you, so you can embrace the gift of waiting with him.

WEEK 2

poured out

“IN THE LAST DAYS, I WILL POUR OUT MY SPIRIT ...”

ACTS 2:17

BAPTISM OF LOVE

day 1

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, pour out the love of God in my heart. Fill me with awareness of who I am in Christ.

READ MARK 1:1-11 AND ACTS 2:32-41.

Mark or take note of every mention of baptism, pouring out, and the Holy Spirit.

Not long ago, it was taking longer than usual for my first grader to fall asleep. I read all the stories and cycled through his favorite songs, hoping he'd settle down. Recalling an old standby from our rocking chair days, I sang:

Hey, beautiful boy, Mommy loves you, she loves you ...

Most beautiful boy, in the whole wide world.

Rather than being lulled into sleep, Nate's whole body tensed. He clung to me, cheek to damp little cheek, and cried: "Mommy! My memories! My memories!" The lullaby had awoken something tender and deep in his little soul. Perhaps he recognized the melody from the long, weary nights of his infancy. Or maybe the simple lyrics pierced Nate's heart with the truth: *he is my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased.*

After Jesus was baptized by John, the Father poured out the Holy Spirit, along with a declaration of Jesus's identity as his son. When we repent and believe the gospel, water baptism is a sign of our identification with Jesus: a public recognition that we are forgiven, cleansed, and made righteous in Christ! But even more, we are sealed and marked as God's own child when Jesus baptizes us with his Spirit. Romans 5:5 tells us, "God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." If water baptism is a baptism of repentance, then the Spirit's baptism is one of love.

The testimony of the Holy Spirit—the story he tells in the tender, often forgotten places of your heart—is that you are God's child (Romans 8:15-16). You are no distant cousin twice removed. You are not begrudgingly beloved. Jesus called God *Abba*, an affectionate, intimate name for Father. God is your *Abba* too, and you are pleasing to him. Everything else in your life may change, but God's love will not. *This is a spiritual reality.* Learning to operate out of that reality, however, can be a process.

Our belovedness does not increase as we mature and grow in holiness, but our awareness of it will as we keep step with the Spirit. I believe this is why our encounters with the Holy Spirit often move us emotionally. In the deepest parts of us, we never outgrow our need to know we have a good Father who delights in his children, settles them in his love ... and even rejoices over them with singing (Zephaniah 3:17).

Hey, beautiful one, your Father loves you; he loves you; he loves you.

May you know, in every nook and cranny of your being: you are God's beloved.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

Read Romans 8:12-17. Do you feel loved by God? When have you felt the most loved by him?

Spend some time in prayer asking God to open your eyes to his lavish love for you. Do you believe it? Or resist it?

FRUIT AND FELLOWSHIP

day 2

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, kindle within me devotion to Jesus and genuine love for his people.

READ ACTS 2:42-47 AND 4:32-35.

As you read, think about what it would be like to belong to a community like this one.

In school, I despised group projects. Equipped with a wide control-freak streak, I'd usually just do the whole thing myself. And so, my typical gut reaction to texts like today's is to say, "Well, that *sounds* great. But I've been let down, left out, and taken advantage of too many times. Can I really trust other people to do their part? Isn't this faith thing ultimately up to me?"

The Acts 2 church is the rootbed of our Christian family tree. We, too, belong to God; we, too, have the Spirit. And just like learning to live as a beloved child is a Spirit-filled process, it takes more than human effort to grow into a faith family. The believers of Acts trusted and relied on one another, not because they were perfect, but because they were surrendered to the fruit-bearing green thumb of the Spirit. Communities bursting with love, joy, peace, faithfulness, and all the rest spring from connection to a well-tended Vine. The kind of fellowship they experienced doesn't just *happen*.

After years of subsisting on a steady mom-diet of caffeine, PBJ crusts, and whatever I could gobble down with a child on my hip, I began to pursue healthier habits. I didn't do anything extreme, but once my new routines became established, I was shocked. I felt better than I had in ages! *Who knew?* (I knew. I just hadn't tried it!) The growth of the Jerusalem church was Spirit-led, but it was not a mystery. They met *daily* to devote themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. What we do, how often we do it, and who we are with has an effect on our spiritual health.

Over the last few summers, I've met with a group of women to pray. We laugh, cry, and speak truth over one another. Their faith is contagious; seeking God together strengthens me in ways Bible classes do not. We need more than solid doctrine to mature; people grow best when we also experience belonging. The Acts 2 church shared meals with sincerity and gladness, which built trust. They had difficult days ahead, but this foundation of joyful fellowship prepared their community with the resilience to bear it. *Koinonia*, the Greek word for fellowship, is a shared life, built for a purpose beyond one's own benefit. Like marriage, it's a self-giving partnership. The generosity of the Jerusalem church displayed the full effect of fellowship in the Holy Spirit. They didn't sell their belongings out of compulsion because Jesus gave no universal mandate to reject all personal property. This wasn't a commune; it was *koinonia*. When everyone is beloved, everyone can be invested.

Ordering our lives around devotion to Jesus and his people doesn't get us an A+ on some imaginary spiritual report card. We don't *earn* the Spirit's fruit, and we can't force people to do church the way we want them to. We can only love them, and let them love us, out of a heart filled to overflowing by the Holy Spirit.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

- When have you experienced the most spiritual growth in your life? What did that season look like, practically? What were you devoted to?
- Do you have practices to connect you with God and his people? If not, record a prayer asking the Holy Spirit to help you create some.

BOLD MOVES

day 3

PAUSE TO PRAY.

God, would you shake anything in me that needs shaking. Fill me with the Holy Spirit, so I may speak your word boldly.

READ ACTS 3:1-4:31.

This part of Acts includes a lot of interactions between Peter and John with others. Note anything that surprises you in these interactions. Also be on the lookout for any mentions of the Holy Spirit!

In Acts 4:8, Peter was described as “filled with the Holy Spirit,” not before he *healed* the disabled man at the temple gate, but before he *spoke* to the religious rulers. What can this mean? Well, it doesn’t mean the Spirit wasn’t involved in the man’s miraculous healing. Since the healing was “in the name of Jesus,” it was not only performed by Christ’s authority, it was *in the same manner* that Jesus healed: by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 5:17, Acts 10:37-38). I think most Christians believe God *can* heal. It’s whether he *will* heal today that gets us twisted up, right? Most of us certainly don’t say things like Peter did when he prayed: “What I do have, I give you: In the name of Jesus, get up.” That’s a bold move.

But boldness is one of the Holy Spirit’s specialties.

The crowd was amazed to see a formerly paralyzed man doing a praise dance; Peter and John had to tell them, “Hey, we’re not the ones doing the wonders here!” But it isn’t the clear evidence of healing that causes the council of religious leaders to wonder. (The same word for “amaze” or “wonder” is used in 3:12 and 4:13). What amazes them is the boldness of Peter and John. If you recall, the night Peter betrayed Jesus, Peter’s Galilean twang gave him away to a servant girl. On this day, Peter and John were recognized as having been with Jesus because they had the same confident, Spirit-soaked way of

speaking that he did. Even after being threatened, beaten, and imprisoned, Peter, John, and the rest of the believers didn’t stop proclaiming the name of Jesus with boldness and joy.

How did Peter go from cowering in the courtyard to quoting Scripture and calling out the hypocrisy of these powerful and educated authorities? He didn’t have formal training or education, but he was *filled with the Holy Spirit*. When writing Acts, Luke used two primary phrases to describe someone filled with the Spirit. When believers are “full of the Holy Spirit,” it describes their character, which bore the marks of the Spirit’s influence. Other times, like in Acts 4:8, Luke tells us individuals were “filled with the Holy Spirit” to point out that the Spirit had given them the supernatural power needed for that very moment. This filling almost always precedes bold, Spirit-empowered speech.

Life in God is not a one-and-done experience, and neither is our need to be filled with the Spirit. The believers in Acts knew that, so they prayed for what only the Spirit could provide: wonders and a bold witness. Jesus promised the Spirit’s help for moments that require confidence and clarity beyond ourselves: “Whenever they bring you before synagogues and rulers and authorities,” he taught, “Don’t worry about how you should defend yourselves or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what must be said” (Luke 11:11-12).

JOURNALING PROMPT:

Think about the mounting opposition the early church faced. How do you respond to intimidating circumstances? Spend some time writing out a prayer, asking God to do in your life what only he can do.

YOU CAN'T BS THE HS

day 4

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, search me and know me. Purify my heart as I seek to be honest with you in everything.

READ ACTS 4:32-5:10.

As you read, take note of the contrasts between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira. Mark any mention of the Holy Spirit.

Yesterday, we read about opposition to the gospel from outside the church. Today, we'll discover there's trouble inside the fellowship, too. Candidly, since we aren't covering every story in Acts, I wanted to skip this one. But I believe it's worth the wrestle. When I come across a troubling text like this one, my comfort zone is research. If I can get a handle on the original language and context, it helps me process even the toughest passages. But sometimes, all the information in the world still doesn't bring peace. The only thing that helps is to pray: "Lord, what do you want me to know?"

I wish I had a neat bow to tie up the story of Ananias and Sapphira with, friend, but here's the phrase that rose up within me when I asked God for understanding: *You can't BS the HS.*

God is not interested in playing pretend with us. Ananias concocted a plan to look holier than he really was, and his wife Sapphira submitted to his deception. Ironically, in order to appear like they were "of one heart and mind" with a generous, Spirit-filled fellowship, they acted duplicitously. They made their goal to fit in and impress others, not to love and serve them. This wasn't about the money, as Peter explained. The problem was counterfeit devotion.

Our text today teaches us that we can lie to the Holy Spirit and test him; elsewhere in the New Testament we learn it is also possible to grieve and quench him (Ephesians 4:30, 1 Thessalonians 5:19). It's almost shocking that

God would allow himself to be limited like this, but the way we live affects the influence and power the Spirit will wield in our lives. When we pretend to be someone we're not, we trust a lie instead of the Spirit of God. Remember, he's the one who testifies that we belong to and are beloved of God. When we set up a facade of false holiness instead of submitting to the Spirit's purifying work in us, we reject the Spirit of Truth. We insist on looking out for our own interests, assuming God won't mind if we don't actually believe or revere him. Frankly, it's demonic. It aligns with the devil's lies: that God isn't good, his word can't be trusted, and he doesn't really love us.

Jesus was given the Spirit without limit (John 3:34) because nothing came between him and his Father. There was nothing self-aggrandizing or fake about him. The devil tempted Jesus to distrust God by misappropriating the Spirit's power for his own glory. Jesus didn't clamor after the acclaim of others because he was totally secure in his identity as God's son. Perhaps one of the reasons the modern church doesn't experience God's power like the early church did is because we are content with counterfeit devotion. We'd rather play pretend than let the Holy Spirit purify us. I think Ananias and Sapphira have their story recorded in Scripture to remind us we can't BS the HS. God is holy; he wants us to be holy, too.

JOURNALING PROMPT:

Psalm 86:11 says, "Teach me your way, Lord; I will walk in your truth; Unite my heart to fear your name." Ask the Spirit to show you where your heart is not united. How do you splice yourself up to please every audience?

What might he want to teach you? How might he want to purify you? Write a prayer of surrender.

day 5

SIMPLICITY

NOW THE ENTIRE GROUP OF THOSE WHO BELIEVED WERE OF ONE HEART AND NO ONE CLAIMED THAT ANY OF HIS POSSESSIONS WAS HIS OWN ... AND GREAT GRACE WAS ON ALL OF THEM.

ACTS 4:32-33

The laundry was out of control. Not an unusual occurrence with five kids, but this time I knew the reason why: it was the towels. Load after load had piled up, towels that had been used once and tossed into the hamper, damp and prime for mildew. If I'd told the kids once, I'd told them a thousand times: *Hang up your towels! Use them more than once! This is not a hotel!* In a fit of frustration, I climbed up to the tippy-top cabinet in the utility room, and shut half of our towels inside with a bang.

And you know what? Months later, there are still stacks of towels lining that high shelf. No one has missed them. I don't miss the hassle of extra sorting, washing, drying, and folding that was filling my time, and I *certainly* don't miss all the irritation that filled my heart as I did so. I didn't just own too many towels; too many towels ended up owning me! It's a trivial example, but it's one that's made me wonder: what else is filling up my life? What else is owning me?

Simplicity brings freedom. In his classic book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster contrasts simplicity, not with excess, but with *duplicity* (Foster, 79). Spiritually speaking, simplicity is a practical way to nurture an undivided heart. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you," Jesus taught (Matthew 6:33). There is freedom that comes when we get clear on the primary priority of our lives. The Jerusalem church sought the kingdom of God first and foremost, and that resulted in generous, confident, Spirit-filled lives. Their possessions were secondary to their people. And there were no needy among them! "All these things" really were taken care of.

It's a trap to think that what we really need is more stuff, or better stuff (or for that matter, lives over-stuffed with activities and accomplishment). Filling our lives up like that can actually harm us. Show me your treasure, Jesus declared, and you'll show me your heart (Matthew 6:21).

It is not my desire to add to your to-do list or guilt you into a decluttering project (although my house could use one, starting with donating those stupid towels). That's not what this is about. This is a way to practice prioritizing Jesus and to align more and more of our whole life with his kingdom. Only follow through with what you sense the Holy Spirit nudging you to do.

IDEAS FOR PRACTICING SIMPLICITY:

Consider a no-spending spree. Set a period of time where you don't buy anything for yourself. Start with a single day and buy nothing, or set a longer time with parameters, such as only buying groceries and gas. Ask God what he'd like you to do with the money you save.

Give away duplicates. We can loosen the grip possessions have on us by offering them to others. What extra stuff do you hold on to "just in case"?

Enjoy what's already available. Resist consumerism by good old fashioned "making do." Utilize the library (or your own bookshelves). Borrow a dress instead of shopping for an event.

Pray specifically about what you need. I can't tell you how often God has provided for us in miraculous and ridiculously personal ways. Last fall, a young adult from church dropped off a pair of brand new basketball shoes for my son after playing a pickup game with him. He didn't know Hank had outgrown his old ones. *They were even his school colors!* God knows what you need. Give him the chance to come through for you. Make room for God to surprise and delight you.

REFLECTION:

As you practice simplicity, journal about the experience. How did it feel to resist buying things or to let go of things? Did "making do" feel frustrating or empowering? Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal your priorities. What do you treasure? What are you trusting other than God?

WEEK 3

interrupted

“YOU STIFF-NECKED PEOPLE WITH UNCIRCUMCISED HEARTS
AND EARS! YOU ARE ALWAYS RESISTING THE HOLY SPIRIT.”

ACTS 7:51

“BROTHER SAUL, THE LORD—JESUS, WHO APPEARED TO YOU ON
THE ROAD AS YOU WERE COMING HERE—HAS SENT ME SO THAT
YOU MAY SEE AGAIN AND BE FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.”

ACTS 9:17, NIV

In Acts, we see a pattern emerge from the very first chapters: first, the kingdom of God is proclaimed, either by words or wonders (often both), and then, people react, either with repentance or rejection. Over and over again, we see the power of interruption at work to open people’s eyes to the truth.

In our session and homework for Week 3, we’ll travel through Acts 7-9, witnessing life in the interrupting presence of God. Interruption invited the people of Acts to re-orient their hearts toward Jesus, to rethink what they thought they knew about life with God. Sometimes ordinary events and people introduce interruption, while in other moments, God intervenes in awe-inspiring ways. But again and again, Acts bears witness to the willingness of the Holy Spirit to invade our world.

GRIEF, INTERRUPTED

day 1

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, interrupt my life so that in every circumstance I may know the Father's joy and the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

READ ACTS 8:1-8.

Note who proclaimed what, and where, and why.

The death of Stephen at the hands of the Sanhedrin rocked the Jerusalem church. It's hard when anyone dies, but when someone especially devoted to Jesus, beloved to people, and effective in ministry dies, we don't just encounter sorrow. We are confronted by questions. *Why Stephen? Why was this evil allowed? Why would God let someone who served the church so faithfully die? If one so full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit could be cruelly killed, are any of us safe?*

Acts 8 doesn't answer these questions. I wish it did, but Scripture tends to simply acknowledge that death and evil exist as a result of sin's presence in the world, rather than to explain it away. I suspect that even if we could get all our questions answered, we'd still feel pain. And so, Acts 8 simply bears witness to the horror and injustice of Stephen's death, as well as to the response of godly believers. They feel the loss. They mourn deeply. To honor Stephen's death publicly was risky—mourning for an executed criminal was typically illegal in ancient contexts (Keener, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, 1884).

In the aftermath of their crushing loss, our text today verifies that those who sow in tears can, in fact, reap with joy. The deepest darkness cannot overcome the light of Christ. Christians have persevered through all manner of evil over the centuries because the power of the Holy Spirit enables believers to overflow with joy and hope, no matter the circumstance (Romans 15:12-13). Scattered as they were by persecution's storm, the followers of Jesus in Acts

flung the word of the Lord far and wide. And the seeds of the gospel took root. The hope we cling to most dearly is the hope we will share most freely.

Suffering always interrupts our expectations. We have to learn to walk with the Spirit in seasons of interruption by taking one faithful step at a time. Don't let what you don't understand keep you from embracing the truth you do. When you are buffeted by pain or fear, reorient yourself to the word of Christ. Philip, like Stephen, had been appointed as a servant-leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:3-6). Yet the loss of his friend and his ministry didn't keep Philip from doing what Jesus said to do: *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"* (Acts 1:8). Philip went to Samaria, believing that the Spirit would provide the power to do what Jesus said to do. And he did; many people were saved and set free! Joy came, even in the mourning.

What was meant to violently disrupt the gospel's reach, God used to advance his kingdom. Even in the presence of grievous evil, life in the Spirit still overflows with hope.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

What painful interruptions or unanswered questions have kept you from trusting the words of Jesus?

Read Romans 15:13. What do you think it means to "abound in hope" by the power of the Holy Spirit?

A SACRED SET-UP

day 2

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, I welcome you to interrupt my day, so I might gladly proclaim Christ wherever I go.

READ ACTS 8:5-8 AND 8:26-40.

Look for any similarities and differences in how Philip proclaims Christ to the Samaritans as opposed to the Ethiopian official.

Yesterday, we found Philip faithfully ministering in Samaria, obedient to Jesus's instruction in Acts 1:8. In today's text, Philip receives revelation so specific the Angel of the Lord sounds a little like Siri: "*At the desert road, take the exit south to Gaza.*"

This was a sacred set-up: God interrupted Philip, so Philip could interrupt a man having a little roadside Bible study with the truth about Jesus. This man had traveled all the way from Africa to visit the Jerusalem temple, but God had more in store than he could ever have anticipated. Through the witness of Philip, the Ethiopian official *became* the temple of the Holy Spirit! And then he got to interrupt his homeland with that same presence and power of God. The gospel was going out to the ends of the earth!

In Acts 8, Philip ministered to a crowd in Samaria *and* one-on-one with the Ethiopian official. He was empowered to proclaim Christ through miraculous signs *and* through Scripture. He traveled by his own two feet *and* by supernaturally zooming away on "Holy Spirit Airlines." Philip was faithful to obey the revealed will of God—to be a witness in Samaria—and to a specific word from the Spirit to run after a chariot. In both cases, however, the expansive kingdom was opened wide to non-Jewish people, whom many in Jerusalem would not consider to be God's kind of people. And Acts 8 is bookended by the joy of new believers welcomed into God's beloved family.

There is no formula for life with God: like Philip, we learn to follow the Scriptures *and* the Spirit.

Most of us won't get a heavenly google alert with precise directions about our day. However, we can be witnesses wherever our footsteps fall. Philip was prime for supernatural interruption because he was fully surrendered to Jesus. When the Ethiopian official asked a question about Isaiah, Philip understood how that prophecy was fulfilled in Christ. Even Philip's Bible study methods had been reinterpreted and reframed by Jesus! The better we know the character of God made known in Christ, the better we'll understand the Bible, *and* the better we'll recognize his voice "in the wild." The Holy Spirit will never tell us to do anything that doesn't align with the word Jesus has already spoken in Scripture. When we are faithful to the Living Word, we'll be able to discern the Spirit's sacred set-ups when they come along.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

Are you prepared for God to interrupt you with an opportunity to proclaim Christ?

If that thought brings up more fear than joy, ask the Holy Spirit why that may be, and record what comes to mind.

UNTIL JESUS

day 3

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, interrupt my life, so I may more clearly behold the dazzling grace of Jesus.

READ ACTS 9:1-21 AND 22:3-16.

Make note of anything you notice about Saul and Ananias.

A young up-and-coming Pharisee, Saul was 100% certain the Jesus movement was dangerous, heretical, and offensive to the God of Israel. Plus, he had the prestigious education, zeal for the law of Moses, and the authority of Jerusalem's religious bigwigs to back him up on that. Saul was 100% convinced that he was justified in shutting Christians down by any means necessary because this Jesus character was dead and buried. He thought he knew the truth about God.

Until Jesus interrupted him.

A disciple of the risen Christ, Ananias of Damascus heard the news that Saul's crusade was tearing a violent path toward his hometown. (This is a different Ananias than we met in Acts 5!) I can only imagine the shiver of fear and dread that tingled down his spine at the name of Saul, having surely heard about Stephen's execution. He'd have known about Saul's alignment with the corrupt Sanhedrin, the ones who handed his Lord over to be crucified. What kind of man would approve of Stephen's violent death? What kind of man would be zealous enough to travel so many miles to drag women and men from their homes for proclaiming Christ? Ananias thought he knew the truth about Saul.

Until Jesus interrupted him.

Acts 9 ought to pierce us to the heart: Do we care more about being right or encountering the Truth? Is the goal of our faith to feel certain, or is it to

see the Lord? Do we trust our own opinions of people, or are we open to be interrupted by the dazzling grace of King Jesus?

Ananias and Saul are evidence that in the kingdom of God, when even death does not have the last word, an enemy can become a brother. Ananias trusted the mercy of God more than he valued the assumptions of his own ears and experience. And Jesus knew he would; he told Saul Ananias would come before he even gave Ananias instructions. Oh, to have that kind of reputation before the Lord! What "enemy" in your circle of influence might be an unlikely sister or brother in waiting? When Ananias bravely laid his hands on Saul, sight and Spirit broke through the darkness. Only the grace of Jesus would call someone like Saul to spend the rest of his life interrupting blind eyes with the Light of the world.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

Think about someone you disagree strongly with or have written off in some way. What assumptions have you made about them? What would it be like to offer them grace? What would it feel like to receive mercy from them?

How has Jesus interrupted your life? Ask him: How might you like to dazzle me with grace today?

MIRACLES ARE INTERRUPTIONS

day 4

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, interrupt me with joy, so I learn to pray with the confident expectation of a beloved child.

READ ACTS 9:32-43.

Note the differences between these two miracles. Do these passages remind you of any other stories in the Bible?

About a year ago, some friends and I watched a video teaching on Luke 9:1-2, where Jesus gave his disciples “power and authority over all the demons and to heal diseases,” and “sent them to proclaim the kingdom and to heal the sick.” The teacher challenged us to try to actually do what Jesus said his disciples had authority to do. We were a touch intimidated, to say the least! But my friend Hillary had badly injured her ankle, so we gathered around the chair and ottoman where she sat, carefully placed our hands on her tender foot, and prayed.

After we’d gone around the circle, Hillary got up and set aside her crutches, bouncing gingerly from one foot to the other toward the center of the room. “*You guys,*” she whispered in awe, “*I think it worked.*” We could not have been more dumbfounded. Stone-still, pop-eyed, and open mouthed, we sat gaping at Hillary as she wiggled and bobbed through her healing-confirmation dance.

Looking from one another, to Hillary, to her discarded crutches, and back again, our silent bubble of disbelief finally popped, and we burst into a cascade of giggles. We laughed in sheer wonder until tears of delight trickled down our faces, and we laughed at ourselves. After all, Jesus taught his disciples to pray to a generous Father, promising the Holy Spirit’s power to do the kinds of things he did, like heal. Yet here we were, women

who’d followed Christ for decades, utterly flabbergasted that God actually answered our prayer.

Even though I believe God still heals people—and I’ve seen it—I don’t claim to understand it. *Why was Hillary healed while another woman in the same group has a chronic condition that still lingers? Why do some people experience healing while so many other people suffer?* I don’t know. I really don’t know. But I’ll tell you this: I won’t let not knowing stop me from praying for healing ever again.

Miracles are *interruptions*. They are a sign that God’s kingdom really is here, among us. His power invades our world and our bodies in ways that disrupt human understanding. There is no biblical pattern for healing that we could try to manipulate, either. In Acts 9, Peter finds Aeneas, but Tabitha’s friends come find Peter. Tabitha was active in her faith, full of good works, but Aeneas was bed-bound for eight years. When Peter told each one to get up, Aeneas heard and obeyed, but Tabitha was dead. Can a dead person obey? I don’t know. Peter saw Jesus pray for sick and dead people, so he did it, too.

Interrupting death was kind of the whole point of Jesus’s life, if you think about it. Every born-by-the-Spirit believer was once spiritually flat-lined, dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:4-7). Is it really so astonishing to followers of a resurrected Savior that he might actually answer our prayers? Maybe it’s not about knowing. Maybe it’s just about following the One we trust can interrupt anything.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

Read our Scripture passage again, slowly. What words or phrases stand out to you? Do you believe God still heals, that he wants to heal? Take some time today to respond honestly to God in prayer.

day 5

INTERRUPTION

IN DAMASCUS THERE WAS A DISCIPLE
NAMED ANANIAS. THE LORD CALLED
TO HIM IN A VISION, "ANANIAS!"
"YES, LORD," HE ANSWERED.

ACTS 9:10

When my youngest son wanted my attention as a toddler, he would put himself between my eyes and whatever I was looking at and say, "I need your face to look to my face." Children are professional interruptors. If you have kids in your home, or work with kids, you don't need to introduce any more interruption into your life. I like to joke that the rustle of Bible pages is like a dog-whistle to my kids. As soon as I get my coffee, cozy up in a

chair, and open the Scriptures, someone immediately calls my name. Even as my kids are getting older and more able to tend to their own needs, I still have to daily reframe their interruptions. I want to view every unexpected "Hey, Mom!" as an invitation to unseat myself from the throne of my life. Just this morning, my 13-year-old texted me about something he needs me to bring to school. My immediate response was resistance. I only have so many quiet hours. Doesn't he know my plan was to write all day ... *about interruption* ... without ... *interruption?!*

Of course, it's not only parents who deal with disruption. And not all interruptions are people. Circumstances change our plans, new information disrupts our once-settled perspective, even our own thoughts can be intrusive. When the unexpected comes our way, we can respond with a spirit of entitlement or with humility. It's not bad to have expectations, of course, but how we react to disruption reveals our priorities. Walking with the Holy Spirit involves letting him expose what's in our hearts. How would our lives and attitudes change if we saw every interruption as the Spirit of God whispering, "I need your face to look to my face?"

IDEAS FOR PRACTICING INTERRUPTION:

Declare a yes day. Set an intention to respond to the interrupting people and events of your day with curiosity. You don't have to literally say "yes" to everyone, but you can posture your heart to say "yes" to loving them and "no" to responding with irritation. How can you honor or serve the people around you? How can you loosen your grip on your own plans and expectations?

Choose not to interrupt others. One way we can practice humility is to listen well when others talk, rather than insisting on being heard.

Choose proximity to people. If you aren't in a season of life where you are often interrupted, (perhaps you live alone or have a job where you don't have to be interrupted often), then find a way to be around people. A great way to do this is to volunteer at church or in the community.

REFLECTION:

Journal about your experience. How did it feel to say yes to things (and to people) you'd normally resist? What, if anything, did you lay aside? Ask the Holy Spirit what he wants to teach you about interruption.

WEEK 4

set free

THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS ON ME ... HE HAS SENT ME TO
PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES AND RECOVERY
OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THE OPPRESSED,
TO PROCLAIM THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR.

LUKE 4:18-19

NOW THE LORD IS THE SPIRIT, AND WHERE THE
SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS, THERE IS FREEDOM.

2 CORINTHIANS 3:17

The first chapters of Acts focus on the first Spirit-filled fellowship, formed by believing Jews from all over the empire, who'd gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. The gospel then spread throughout Judea to Samaria, bridging the ancient animosity between Jews and Samaritans. Through Philip, a god-fearer from Ethiopia became the first Gentile convert, and by the end of Acts, Paul and his ministry team have proclaimed Christ and his kingdom throughout the Roman Empire. The Spirit poured out on men and women, Jew and non-Jew, slave and free—and made them one family in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

But the process, especially in the middle of Acts, was messy. The lines of cultural, social, and religious division ran deep between Jews and Gentiles. In our teaching session this week, we witnessed the resistance of Jewish Christians to Peter's testimony about Cornelius and his household. They are flabbergasted that the Holy Spirit would fill non-Jewish people, a clear sign of God's acceptance of them as his holy dwelling.

For generation upon generation, being God's chosen people meant something very particular: following the law of Moses, set apart from pagan peoples. But in Christ, a new covenant was mediated; every requirement of the old covenant was met. Jesus was the light to the Gentiles that Israel failed to be. Christ came to set people free from sin, as well as from any obligation to the law of Moses. In this week of homework, we'll bounce around the middle chapters of Acts as we discover the freedom that is in Christ. Learning to be free can be messy, but never forget that we have a Helper. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom!

FREEDOM FROM SELF

day 1

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, unbind my ego from anything that keeps me from embracing the life you've called me to in Christ.

READ ACTS 4:36-37, 9:26-30, AND 11:19-26.

Take note of how Barnabas is described. What do you notice about him?

In chapters 9-15 of Acts, there's a shift in the main characters of the story. The beginning focuses on Peter and the Jerusalem apostles, and the final parts follow Saul (who began to be known by his Roman name, Paul) on his missionary journeys. In the messy middle, we bounce from Peter to Paul/Saul and back again as we see the church expand from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. We also find two unlikely words, introducing a character upon which this shift from Peter to Paul hinges: "**But Barnabas**" (Acts 9:27, 11:25).

The apostles were afraid to meet Saul, **but Barnabas** recognized evidence of God's calling on Saul's life and brought them together. When the first true community of non-Jewish believers cropped up in Antioch, the church in Jerusalem had their doubts, **but Barnabas** saw the grace of God at work. He was the encourager they sent to check in on the unlikely church, and through his joyful Spirit-fueled leadership, the church grew. He could have continued to lead the Antioch church alone, **but Barnabas** saw an opportunity to empower someone else. So once more, he goes to find Saul, this time traveling all the way to Tarsus. Barnabas saw God's grace upon Saul too, and a dynamite ministry team was born. Saul became known as the apostle to the Gentiles, **but Barnabas** was the apostle sent to encourage and empower Paul.

My Gen-Z teens tell me there's this thing called "main character energy," which refers to those who prioritize themselves no matter what. Everyone else is just a sidekick in their hero's journey. Barnabas is best known as a supporting character in the story of Acts—**but Barnabas** knew that **Jesus**

is the catalyst and climax of every story, and that set him free to come alongside other people. Barnabas was full of the Spirit and fully free of himself. He had nothing to prove or protect. He could step in, step up, and step aside, all for the sake of the gospel and generous love for the people around him. He was free to see God's grace in unlikely people and places.

I have to wonder: how many of us are one "**but Barnabas**" moment away from a shift in our story?

Acts 4:36 tells us Barnabas earned himself a nickname: "Son of encouragement." This is translated from *huios paraklesis* in Greek. Remember our study in Week 1? Holy Spirit has a nickname, too: **Parakletos**, meaning "one who is called alongside." **Paraklesis** comes from the same root words as **Parakletos**. Barnabas wasn't just an encouraging guy; he was known for his likeness to the Holy Spirit. Friend, Jesus has a calling on your life. The Holy Spirit isn't just within you; he's alongside you, ready to set you free to step into the next part of your story with Jesus.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

Consider any "but Barnabas" moments in your life; who is someone who has come alongside you, or recognized God's grace in your life and called it out?

What keeps you from stepping in to encourage other people? Ask the Holy Spirit to bring someone to mind that you could come alongside as a Barnabas.

FREEDOM FROM SIN

day 2

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, release me from any deception that enslaves me to a spirit of condemnation. Set me free to walk in wholeness.

READ ACTS 10:37-43 AND ACTS 16:16-40.

What was the slave girl set free from? What was the cost of her freedom?

This week is all about freedom. We covered Acts 10 in our teaching session, but I want you to come to the story in Acts 16 with this truth fresh on your mind: Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit to heal and set people free. The gospel message I grew up with emphasized that the power of the cross redeems and forgives people from their sin. And that's absolutely the gospel truth.

But friend, there's *more* to the gospel than personal forgiveness, more even to our salvation than eternity with God. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus announced that the Holy Spirit anointed him to proclaim release, or freedom, to those held captive and those who are oppressed. The word for release? It's *aphesis*, the exact same word that's translated as *forgiveness* in Acts 2:38, 5:31, 10:43, 13:38, and 26:18. Jesus was sent by the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to release you from *anything* that enslaves you. Not only is his mission to set you free from your own sin, he's come to untie any knots that *other people's sin* have bound you up in, too. Salvation is a deep and continual work of experiencing the freedom Jesus has earned for you. Jesus doesn't just save you from hell, he saves you from your issues—the ones you chose and the ones other people chose for you.

The story in Acts 16 is odd, isn't it? Paul did not seem eager to seek deliverance for this young girl. Maybe he wanted to avoid any public disruptions until the church in Philippi was more established, but Jesus had other plans. He

set this slave girl free, not only from incredible spiritual oppression, but from the harm done to her by people who used, abused, and enslaved her. You see the cruelty of these men in the false accusations they make toward Paul and Silas and the violence that followed. But Jesus intervenes and sets Paul and Silas free, too. The physical bars and chains of prison shake loose, but even before that, their song of praise bears witness to the inner freedom they'd already found. And through their supernatural rescue, the very jailer who locked them up finds freedom and joy in Christ!

The Holy Spirit stands ready to free you from any trauma, any abuse, any dysfunction, any addiction, any oppression, rejection or abandonment that holds you captive. The word "devil" in Acts 10:38 is a title that means *false accuser*. What accusation or lying holdout from your past has you bound up? Hear this, beloved: no chain is stronger than the cross of Christ. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. In Christ, the law of the Spirit of life **set you free** from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:1-2).

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

How do you react to the concept of freedom from sins done to you? If you encounter resistance, ask the Holy Spirit why that might be?

What do you feel bound by? What truth might the Holy Spirit want to speak over you? What steps could you take to encounter the deliverance Jesus offers you?

FREEDOM FROM FEAR

day 3

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, set me free from all anxiety threatening my soul. I receive the unsurpassable peace of Christ Jesus.

READ ACTS 12:1-19 AND ACTS 16:25.

Take note of the reactions of Peter, Paul, and Silas to their imprisonment.

The year my grandfather died, my grandmother took the whole family on a cruise. I still remember how disorienting it felt to trade Christmas trees for palm trees! Instead of gathering near a cozy fire to open gifts, we sat on a balcony overlooking the deep blue sea. But that was precisely the point—to avoid any familiar trappings or traditions that would remind us of our grief.

In Acts 12, we find Peter imprisoned during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. This holy celebration, which led up to Passover, held an ocean of memories for Peter. Even from his prison cell, I can only imagine that Peter was flooded with scenes from that fateful Passover when Jesus died: the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the clash with religious leaders in the temple, the last supper, prayer in the garden, his arrest and unjust trial. Peter's own betrayal and the agonizing suffering on the cross. Added to this, Peter's close friend and fellow apostle James, brother of John and son of Zebedee, had just been executed. James drank the cup of suffering at the hands of corrupt leaders, just as Jesus had. And all the evidence pointed to Peter being next.

And yet, while the church prayed earnestly for him, Peter slept. On the night he had every conceivable reason to toss and turn, fear and fret, Peter slept so soundly that the bright light of an angelic being didn't disturb his rest. The angel had to whack him to wake him. (Sounds like waking up my teenagers for school!) Most angelic encounters in Scripture begin with a

compassionate declaration: "Don't be afraid!" but not for Peter. Maybe he was just out of it, hadn't "come to himself" yet, but maybe he simply *wasn't afraid*. Can you imagine the kind of trust that takes? The same man who had once roused a sleeping Jesus in the middle of the sea of Galilee, terrified of the wind and waves lapping around their boat, now slept through his own stormy circumstances. Peter knew who held the real power, who was the true King, and it wasn't Herod.

Years after his own imprisonment in Philippi, Paul wrote a letter to the church in that city. He told the Philippian Christians to bring every swirling thought that threatened their hearts and minds to God. There is power in naming what worries us, setting our fears, one by one, before a God who cares for us. Paul didn't offer advice to "just pray about it" in a way that diminished or invalidated their feelings. He wasn't downplaying anything here: the risks and dangers of this world are real. Fear is, too. Yet Paul insisted it was possible to be free from anxiety*, because God's peace is powerful enough to surpass everything else (Philippians 3:6-7). After all, like Peter, he'd experienced it for himself.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

Do you believe it's possible to live free from worry? If not, why?

What triggers anxious thoughts for you? What is at the root of what keeps you up at night? Ask the Spirit to help you sift through your fears and exchange them for God's surpassing peace.

**For clarification, this does not mean that treatment should not be sought for anxiety disorders. It is possible, and often best, to seek God's peace and medical and/or therapeutic intervention simultaneously.*

FREEDOM FROM LEGALISM

day 4

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, you are the freedom bringer. Set me free from anything I've added to the gospel.

READ ACTS 15:1-35.

Note what the dispute was about and how it was handled.

In chapters 13-14 of Acts, Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the gospel throughout the region of modern-day Turkey before returning to Antioch. They followed a pattern of ministry where they first approached the Jewish community in synagogues, proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah who fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures. Then they turned to the Gentiles. People from both groups responded to the gospel with genuine faith, receiving the Holy Spirit as a sign of full inclusion in the family of God. But many Jews opposed opening God's kingdom to pagans. Paul and Barnabas were mistreated, run out of towns, and even left for dead.

After all this, they returned to Antioch, to the church that had sent them out on mission by the Holy Spirit's direction (Acts 13:1-3). Imagine their reaction when a group of Jewish believers from Judea traveled 300 miles to Antioch (a church made up of mostly non-Jews) to announce there could be no salvation apart from the law of Moses. They were basically saying all those Gentile converts were not real Christians! No wonder Paul and Barnabas were willing to fight. This was no small doctrinal dispute. To put the yoke of circumcision on Gentiles was to promote a works-based gospel and to claim that the grace of Jesus was not sufficient to save. The meeting to hash out this dispute has become known as the Jerusalem Council.

The pro-circumcision believers missed the heart of the very law they were trying to honor. But consider this: many of the pagan worship practices of Gentiles were offensive to Jews, and it may be that rather than wanting to keep Gentiles out, they just didn't understand how they'd ever fit in. They assumed followers of a Jewish Messiah ought to become Jewish like them. They didn't realize Jesus had fulfilled every obligation of the law perfectly, so no one else has to even try.

Friends, I've been a modern-day Pharisee. I believed that to be acceptable to God and other Christians, I needed to obey a bunch of rules and fit into a certain good-Christian-girl stereotype. I tied myself up in knots of shame and self-righteousness trying to be perfect. And with (mostly) good intentions, I heaped that burden on others, too. But Jesus plus anything is *not* the gospel. To hold anyone (even yourself) to another standard is to reject the grace and goodness of Jesus. Disentangling my faith in Christ from legalism was a long, messy process for me, as it was for the early church. The ruling of the Jerusalem Council letter, arrived at with the Spirit's help, is a reflection of the kind of freedom we have in Christ. We limit our freedom to honor God and one another, not because we have to obey rules to earn a spot around God's table. With soft hearts, ready to be circumcised by the Spirit, we can live by the liberating law of love.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

What's your experience with modern-day Pharisees?

"Having begun by the Spirit, are you now finishing by the flesh? But where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (Galatians 3:3, 2 Corinthians 3:17). What do you think the Holy Spirit's role in our freedom is? (If you have time, read Galatians 3-5.)

day 5

SABBATH REST

THROUGH HIM EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES IS SET FREE FROM EVERY SIN, A JUSTIFICATION YOU WERE NOT ABLE TO OBTAIN UNDER THE LAW OF MOSES.

ACTS 13:1-3

A day of rest was the first thing God ever set apart as holy (Genesis 2:2-3). How about that: the first real spiritual practice was to do ... *nothing*. To rest from working, toiling, striving, and earning. Have you ever considered that God didn't actually need to rest, yet he still did it? If the Almighty had the freedom to rest from his work, why do we humans so often resist it?

When we set time aside to be purposefully unproductive, we embody the reality of God's care for us. Rest reminds us we are not what we do and that God does not need our help running the planet. As Christians, the Sabbath is a way to embrace the grace of Jesus. Tim Keller wrote that "when we find salvation through Christ, we rest from the most debilitating work of all—the work of establishing our own worth through our efforts, the work of earning our salvation." Sabbath-keeping can become one more doorway to step into the freedom available to God's beloved children.

IDEAS FOR PRACTICING SABBATH:

Set a time. It will probably be tricky to carve out a whole day on such short notice. Find a stretch of a few hours this week, and let that be enough to begin with.

Prepare. Think about your chosen Sabbath, and anticipate what might help you rest. Prepping simple meals ahead of time or getting ahead on household tasks might make it easier for you to refrain from busyness. You will probably need to communicate your Sabbath plan to your family, as well.

Get practical. Sabbath need not look the same for every person. Maybe you have a nursing baby and the best Sabbath for you would be for your partner to take the night shift. Maybe you are a caregiver and need to arrange respite care.

Do nothing. Honestly, even planning a rest can stress me out sometimes. Do I nap? Do I read? Do I go for a walk? It takes a while to let ourselves release the pressure valve of productivity and effectiveness, even when it comes to rest. Make sure you don't overschedule your unscheduled time. Pray about what you really need rest from, and then do what you want. Resist the urge to overcomplicate it, but I really don't think you can go wrong with a big fat nap.

Do something. The Genesis account indicates that God enjoyed his own creation—saying, “It is good!” You can do the same, either by spending time outside or by doing something creative you enjoy. Perhaps you have a hobby you love but never give yourself permission to pursue. Make time to do the thing that makes you feel alive and thankful for God's creation (and YOU are part of his creation! Enjoy being the uniquely made YOU!).

REFLECTION:

Journal about your experience. How did it feel to refrain from productivity? What were the challenges? What were the benefits? Ask the Holy Spirit what he wants to teach you about rest.

WEEK 5

Carried along

“IN HIM WE LIVE AND MOVE AND HAVE OUR BEING ...”

ACTS 17:28

“FOR PROPHECY NEVER HAD ITS ORIGIN IN THE HUMAN
WILL, BUT PROPHETS, THOUGH HUMAN, SPOKE FROM GOD
AS THEY WERE CARRIED ALONG BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.”

2 PETER 1:21, NIV

SEEING IN THE SPIRIT

day 1

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Spirit of Truth, open my eyes, so I can faithfully step into what God is already up to, all around me.

READ ACTS 13:1-12.

Note every mention of the Holy Spirit. What do you notice about his actions?

Paul and Barnabas were set apart, called, and sent out on mission by the Holy Spirit. Today's text is the first story Luke recorded from Paul and Barnabas's very first missionary journey together. It's also the passage that marks the shift in Acts from Saul to Paul. It was not uncommon for people in ancient times to have multiple names; Saul was a Jewish name, so it makes sense that Paul would go by his Roman name as he traveled in Gentile circles. Some scholars suppose that Paul made the switch in part as a nod to Sergius Paulus, his first Gentile convert!

When Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the word of God on Cyprus, they were immediately opposed by a false prophet and sorcerer named Elymas. This is not a sign that they were off track or should head home, though. Just because what God calls you to is challenging or unpopular doesn't mean you are doing it wrong. The Lord doesn't call us to tasks that are easy. As with Paul and Barnabas, the presence of opposition is a reminder to rely upon the One who sent us, to help us! Opposition to the gospel can be dramatic and obvious, but often it takes the form of deceit or trickery, like Elymas. People can twist the truth of the gospel just enough to sound believable, but the root is always a lie. There is no alternative, equal-but-opposite source of truth. There are only distractions, deceptions, and distortions of what God has declared in Christ. Blaise Pascal said: "Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that, unless we love the truth, we cannot know it."

Before Paul spoke boldly to Elymas, the text points out two things: first, Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit, and secondly, Paul *looked intently* at Elymas. Remember Week 2? We learned that when the text tells us that the Holy Spirit fills someone who's already a believer, it is because God is equipping them to declare the truth with bold clarity. In Acts 3:4, when Peter healed the man at the temple gate, he also looked intently at him, as Paul does here, before intervening supernaturally. The original word, *atenizo*, means to behold earnestly or fasten your gaze upon someone. Paul didn't assume he knew what was going on with Elymas and just blurt out a stern rebuke: *He saw him in the Spirit before speaking by the Spirit.*

The Holy Spirit can and does give spiritual insight to believers about things we wouldn't otherwise see or comprehend (1 Corinthians 2:8-16). We need to ask him for discernment before speaking. Paul's vision was filtered through the deep things of God: even in the judgment he declared to Elymas, Paul had his truth-in-love glasses on. There's plenty of folks who spout condemnation without discernment, and the result can be highly destructive. Paul's encounter with Elymas had the opposite effect; this confrontation cleared a straight path for Sergius Paulus to come to Jesus unhindered.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

Paul was once blinded. Why might Paul's confrontation with Elymas have resulted in another temporary blindness?

Have you ever had a dramatic confrontation with the truth? How did you respond?

SENSITIVITY TO THE SPIRIT

day 2

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, refine my desires and emotions, so I can feel your love for the people I meet today.

READ ACTS 15:36-41 AND 16:1-5.

This text records the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey. Flipping back to 13:1-3 if necessary, think about the differences between the two beginnings.

Acts insists, over and over again, that there is no formula to following the Holy Spirit. Paul and Barnabas were commissioned by the Holy Spirit and their church in Antioch, and they were obedient to that call. In today's text, they simply *want* to visit and strengthen the brothers and sisters they met on their initial journey. I've talked with Christians who are afraid to follow their hearts. I understand the reason behind this aversion; we want to trust Jesus, not be ruled by our whims and emotions. But our hearts—and our feelings—are gifts from God. He gave us emotions for good reason. Why would we ignore what moves us emotionally, if our hearts are submitted to God? When we love people, that love should compel us to action.

When aligned with Christ's kingdom priorities, we don't need to view every desire of our heart with suspicion. I am a crier; I always have been. I used to despise this trait of mine, assuming it was a sign of weakness and that if I cried, people would see me as some hysterical, illogical woman. I avoided teaching the Bible for years because my emotional response to Scripture so often moved me to tears. But I've learned to pay attention to my feelings. My sensitivity to the Spirit is a gift I've learned to be grateful for, especially in my teaching. It's not the way it always happens, but the Holy Spirit can absolutely lead us through our emotions. He'll even lead us through heartbreak.

We witnessed Paul and Barnabas fight together for the gospel in Acts 15; now we see them fight one another. I've been through a friendship breakup,

and it was absolutely crushing. Conflict is always hard. I've grown to love the dynamic duo of Paul and Barnabas, but I'm so grateful Luke included the details behind their split. Rough edges in Scripture remind us that these were real people. And real people, even Spirit-filled, faithful people, don't always see eye-to-eye. There's no indication that either man was right; they were just different. Paul prioritized the mission because he loved people. Barnabas prioritized John Mark because he loved people, too. And even in the heartbreak, we see them carried along by the Holy Spirit. John Mark is given another chance through our favorite encourager; Silas partnered with Paul, and the church of Jesus Christ was strengthened and grew.

That brings us to Timothy. Even after fighting to establish that circumcision was not necessary for salvation, Paul circumcised Timothy. Why? Again, there is no formula to following the Spirit. If Timothy was to be welcomed in Jewish spaces with the message about Jesus, he needed to be circumcised. This decision was not about keeping the rules, it was about prioritizing relationship. This was how Paul loved God and others, and how he taught Timothy to do the same: by surrendering in service to the gospel of Jesus.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

Do you tend to trust your feelings or feel suspicious of them? Why might that be?

Have you gone through a heartbreak like Barnabas and Paul's? Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal God's grace for you in that situation.

What is a way you can offer love to people that isn't technically required of a Christian?

RED LIGHT, GREEN LIGHT

day 3

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Holy Spirit, open my eyes to your guidance. Thank you for every roadblock that leads me to you.

READ ACTS 16:6-15.

Paul and his companions have retraced Paul's initial journey through Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. Take note of where they try to go next, the different ways God leads Paul and his companions, and where they end up.

It has been a minute since I've been well and truly lost, what with iPhone navigation and all, but not long ago it happened. I was in an unfamiliar city when I came upon a train and figured I could find an underpass to avoid it. There is nothing more frustrating than trying to find your way, only to come upon dead ends and road blocks, and that's just what happened to me. Here in Acts 16, the Holy Spirit guides Paul and his ministry companions through a series of closed doors. Paul had visited the churches he'd established in Asia Minor, and now his plan was to continue on to new cities to proclaim the word. This was a good and holy desire, in keeping to the calling on Paul's life to reach the Gentiles (Acts 26:16-18). Like Paul, when we step out in faith, trusting we have God's green light, we have to remain sensitive to any red lights he may place in our path. We learn to say "yes" to God—even to say "yes" to his "no."

It wasn't until after they encounter roadblocks that Paul finally receives divine directions through a dream. (I thought about naming this day "Red Rover, Red Rover, send Paul on over" in honor of the Macedonian's invitation!) Even though the dream was given to Paul, it was confirmed by his partners. If you notice, nearly all the pronouns in this section are plural. Paul got the vision, but the whole ministry team was guided. The word for "concluding" in verse 10 means to work out, like a puzzle. Receiving supernatural wisdom

doesn't mean God requires us to check our rational minds at the door; it also doesn't exempt us from making decisions within godly community. I mean, I have some weird dreams—I wouldn't want to follow them unless I had confirmation they were from the Lord. We have to be willing to be both humble and bold; God will never lead us in ways that don't build our faith in him. He wants us to trust him every step of the way.

God's guidance to Paul was both gradual and unpredictable. Following the Lord is like that, isn't it? We don't get all the details at once, but we can trust he's already at work wherever he leads us. That "Man of Macedonia" Paul dreamed about? Sure seems to me that he turned out to be a lady named Lydia. The Lord had opened her heart, so the Holy Spirit pulled out all the stops to bring Paul and his friends to her doorstep.

And just so you don't worry over the areas Paul was blocked from visiting, that region includes Ephesus as well as six other cities mentioned among the churches in Revelation chapter 2. God wasn't preventing ministry in that region permanently; it just wasn't the right time yet.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

Have you been led by roadblocks before? How did you respond?

To quote the great American "theologian" Garth Brooks, "Thank God for unanswered prayers." Spend some time reflecting on how God's "no's" have become blessings.

RELYING ON THE POWER OF GOD

day 4

PAUSE TO PRAY.

Jesus, it is your joy to empower me. May my every insufficiency become a magnet for your grace.

READ ACTS 17-18:11.

Resist hurrying through the text today. Take time to notice every reaction to the gospel during Paul's travels. Imagine how you would feel in his shoes.

The apostle Paul was interrupted and appointed by Jesus himself to carry the gospel. He was filled and freed by the Holy Spirit. And yet, he was not insulated from criticism, rejection, or suffering. When Paul recalled this point in his journey in a letter to the Corinthian church, he said this:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come as someone superior in speaking ability or wisdom, as I proclaimed to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I also was with you in weakness and fear, and in great trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of mankind, but on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

If the mighty apostle Paul experienced weakness and fear, then be assured that bouts of insecurity are to be expected. But suffering sharpened Paul's focus. He didn't shrink back from his mission when life got hard; everything he went through pushed him into deeper intimacy with Jesus. He doubled down on the truest truth: Jesus Christ, and him crucified. The Spirit can even transform our weaknesses into connection points with Jesus; areas where his grace and power can most clearly shine through us. If God only

called us to walk in areas of our strength and sufficiency, what need would we have for the Holy Spirit? What hope would we offer other people, if we only relied on ourselves?

I encountered my own deep well of weakness, fear, and great trembling as I wrote this workbook. I've never done anything like this before. I jokingly told my husband that the challenge of wrestling words onto the page made me feel like "a big dumb baby." But you know what I learned as I did it anyway, however imperfectly? God loves to empower the inadequate. I know, because in the gospel of Luke, when a group of disciples returned from their own mission, they reported back to Jesus. They were so excited to tell him about all they saw God do in the lives of the people they met. I will never get over our Lord's response to those believers, because the Holy Spirit seared the words onto my discouraged little heart when I read the story: Full of *joy in the Holy Spirit*, Jesus praised the Father, not because of what he revealed to wise scholars or intelligent experts, but to *infants* (Luke 10:21). It makes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rejoice together to bring the kingdom to you, and through you, in all your weakness. Our faith does not rest on the wisdom of mankind, but the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:5).

I'm sad our journey together is coming to a close, but so thankful that life in the Holy Spirit will go on forever. Even on the days you feel like a big dumb baby, don't underestimate the power of God at work in you. He hasn't called you to easy, he's called you to himself. Trust him; he'll carry you along.

JOURNALING PROMPTS:

What are you taking with you from this study? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how he wants to shine through your weakness and inadequacies.

day 5

LISTENING PRAYER

“THE LORD OPENED HER HEART
TO LISTEN EAGERLY ...”

ACTS 16:14, NRSV

The Holy Spirit leads, guides, and speaks to people in lots of ways. He does so through ordinary and extraordinary means: through Scripture, through his people, through the desires and dreams God tucks into our hearts, even through roadblocks and red lights. My great desire for you (and for me!) is that we'd continue to draw near to the Holy Spirit now that our study is concluding. God has so much more to teach us as we follow Jesus. May the Spirit open our hearts to listen eagerly for his voice!

One of the ways I like to listen for the Spirit in prayer is with a journal and two colored pens. I (very creatively) call it “Two Pen Journaling,” but really, it's just listening prayer with a crafty twist. Here's what you do: record your thoughts, prayers, and questions in one color ink, and then ask the Holy Spirit what he wants to say to you. Then, record what comes to mind in a different color. That's it.

When I began journaling this way, I felt paralyzed. I was too nervous to write anything in the God-colored pen. What if I heard wrong? Or worse, what if I didn't hear anything at all? Those concerns are normal, as we come to the Lord with honesty and humility. But we need not fear or avoid trying to hear from the Holy Spirit. God wants to speak to us, and he's given us lots of ways to test what we hear as we practice listening prayer. Let me share with you what helps me get unstuck.

IDEAS FOR LISTENING PRAYER:

Wait: If you don't hear anything, wait. Let your thoughts settle and clear. Stay quiet until you are quiet. Be still on the outside, until you are still on the inside.

Wonder: If you don't hear anything after waiting and being still, get curious. Is there anything you've sensed God telling you in the past that you ignored? Maybe you need to remember and repent, then respond to what he's said before.

Go to Scripture. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring something from the Bible to mind that applies to your life right now. (You can even ask him to help you google an applicable verse. I do sometimes, and I give you permission to do it, too. You can just search up “verses about listening to God” or “verses about fear,” that kind of thing.) Then write the Scripture in the “God color” and pray, waiting for any insight. Write that down, too, and then respond in the “me color.”

WEEK 6

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