

Called to be Witnesses

The Early Church

December 28th, 2015

Day 1 What is a Witness?

Acts 1:1-11

Getting Started: In common usage, what is a witness? [*Someone who has seen something and is able to talk about it.*] What are ways people are witnesses in everyday situations? [*Think of news reporting, an accident scene or a court scene.*]

1. Acts is Dr. Luke's sequel to his Gospel, taking up the story where he left off in the book of Luke. Read Luke 24:36–53 to set the stage for the opening to Acts.
2. Now read Acts 1:1–11. How was Jesus occupied during the time between his resurrection and his ascension into heaven? How would these things prepare the disciples for his departure?
3. Why couldn't they begin spreading the word of the kingdom of God immediately? What did Jesus mean by "the promise of the Father"? (See John 14:16–17, 25–26 for more background.)
4. What expectation is reflected in the disciples' question in verse 6? [*Note: Most Jewish people had expected the Messiah to be a political/military ruler who would set Israel free from Roman rule and establish Israel as a great political power.*] How does Jesus redirect their attention [*verses 7–8*]? Are there similar concerns we struggle with that can distract us from our primary responsibilities as Jesus' representatives? How should we keep these in proper perspective?
5. What are the disciples told they'll receive in verse 8? For what purpose will they receive it? What is the scope of their assignment? If this had taken place in your town, what places could be substituted for those in verse 8?
6. What happened next? What kinds of reactions might this have produced among the disciples? What do the men in white robes tell the disciples? How would this information have helped the disciples just then? And later?
7. At the beginning we defined witness. In verse 8 the disciples were called to be witnesses to Jesus. How does this call extend to us?

In Closing: Spend some time praying for power to be witnesses to the person and work of Jesus, beginning where we are and continuing to the ends of the earth.

DAY 2: Witness to and through Jesus' Power

Acts 3:1-26

Getting Started:

When was a time you asked for something, but got something better in return?

1. Read Acts 3:1–26. How does Luke describe the condition and situation of the beggar in verse 2?
2. Recount the actions of Peter in verses 3–7. What details does Luke give in verses 7–9 to let us know that this is a miracle?
3. What was the reaction of the crowd in verses 10–11 ? What possible misunderstanding of the miracle on the crowd's part did Peter anticipate in verse 12?
4. From verse 12 to the end of the chapter, Peter speaks to the crowd about Jesus. Looking at verses 13–15, contrast the titles Peter uses to designate Jesus with the horrendous ways the people treated him. What “excuse” do they have [verse 17]?
5. In verses 19–23, what does Peter say is a proper response to Jesus Christ? What are the benefits? What is the consequence if they do not respond positively?
6. While scanning through Peter's entire speech, pick out the promises that God had made through his servants. How has Jesus already fulfilled those promises? How is he fulfilling them presently? How will he fulfill them in the future? [Note: Verse 25 says that through the descendants of Abraham “all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” The offspring of Abraham who were to be the instruments of this blessing were the Jewish people originally (verse 25), Jesus Christ ultimately, and believers in Jesus now (Galatians 3:29).]

In Closing:

Peter and John certainly brought a “blessing” to this lame man, and a “blessing” of the Good News to those who heard their message. How can you be an instrument of God's blessing to your neighborhood this week? To the world?

Day 3: The Witness of Life Together

Acts 4:23-37

Background:

In the section leading up to this (Acts 3–4:22), Peter and John had been brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council of priests and elders. After considerable debate, they were released but sternly charged not to continue to preach the gospel. Yet Peter tells them, “. . . we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Act 4:23–37 gives us an inside look at a community of witnesses to Jesus.

Getting Started:

Think of a group of people—a community (Christian or non-Christian)—of which you are a member. What defines your community? How do its members relate to one another? How does the community relate to those outside it?

1. Read Acts 4:23–37. After Peter and John are released, what is the first thing they do? How does the community respond to the situation? How does your Christian community respond to opposition?
2. Look for a moment at verses 24–28. How is God described? What do these different descriptions tell us about him?
3. As they pray, the community quotes from Psalm 2, a prophetic psalm referring to the coming kingship of Christ. Turn for a minute to Psalm 2:1–9, but don't lose your place in Acts. How are the events recounted in this psalm similar to the events recounted in Acts 4:27–28?
4. In each case, who is standing in opposition to God? How does God respond? Why is this opposition “in vain”?
5. How would recalling God's past dealing with those who conspire against him be an encouragement to this fledgling community?
6. Now look at the rest of the prayer in Acts 4:29–30. In light of what God has done in the past, what do they ask him to do for them? How does he respond to them in verse 31?
7. Verses 32–37 give us a closer look at the Christian community. What are some specific ways they lived out their “one heart and soul [*or mind*]”? What does this tell us about their priorities?
8. Verse 33 tells about their “witness” or “testimony.” What adjectives are used to describe their witness?
9. Put yourself in the story. If you were on the outside looking in, what might be going through your mind as you observe these Christians interacting with each other and with others?

In Closing: What does it mean to be “one in heart and soul?” What doesn't it mean? What would your fellowship at church look like if it really was of “one heart and soul?” What would your witness be like? What are some things you can do to strengthen your community?

Day 4: Stephen's Witness and Death

Acts 6:1-8:4

Getting Started:

What do you think was the cost for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in the first century? What is the potential cost in your town or in your family?

1. Read Acts 6:1–8. What words are used here to characterize Stephen [verses 3, 5, 8]?
2. Now read verses 9–15. Compare the way Stephen's opponents handled the "problem" that they had (Stephen's powerful preaching) with the way the believers in verses 1–8 handled the problem of food distribution.
3. Why do you think the activities of Stephen and the church aroused opposition [verses 7–8]? What led Stephen's opponents to resort to deception [verse 10]? Why do you think Luke mentions in verse 15 that Stephen's face was "like the face of an angel"?
4. What are the prevalent attitudes in your social circles toward the gospel of Jesus Christ? Do the things Christians do and preach arouse opposition? Why or why not?
5. Skim Acts 7:1–50, which records Stephen's defense against the charges of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Try to summarize the central point of Stephen's speech.
[By tracing God's calling and promise through the patriarchs, Stephen demonstrates that it is the religious establishment—not the Christian community—that misunderstands the temple and the law of Moses. He draws the distinction between God's faithful prophets and those who rejected them. He identifies Christians as God's truly faithful people and the religious leaders as being opposed to God.]
6. Read Acts 7:51–60. In what ways are Stephen's opponents just like their ancestors [verses 51–52]? What is the irony of verse 53? As this story unfolds, why do Stephen's opponents become so hostile? How does Stephen respond?
7. Read 8:1–4. How did the purposes of Stephen's persecutors contribute to the mission of the church [verse 4]? What does this say about God?

In Closing:

Compare the message of salvation in Jesus Christ to the conventional wisdom in your social circles. Do you see any evidences of hostility or suspicion toward the gospel? In what ways does your behavior affect the credibility of your witness (both positively and negatively)?

Day 5: Witness to the Power to Convert & Transform

Acts 9:1-22

Getting Started:

If you were to vote for the person “most likely never to become a Christian” whom would you choose? Why? If you had lived in the first century, you probably would have chosen Saul of Tarsus—and you wouldn’t have been alone. In the passage you will read the powerful story of a very unlikely convert.

1. Read Acts 9: 1–2. What do these verses, as well as the previous study, tell us about Saul and his relationship with the early believers? What symbols of power does Paul have as he travels to Damascus?
2. Now read Acts 9:3–22 to get the rest of the story. Looking at verses 3–9, what happened to Saul on his journey? Try to visualize the scene, and put yourself in the place of the eyewitnesses mentioned in verse 7. What do you see and hear? What are you feeling? How do you think Saul felt?
3. What does the Lord tell Ananias to do? How does Ananias respond? Thinking of the person you chose as the “most unlikely Christian,” what would you do if Jesus came to you in a vision telling you to confront this person?
4. In verse 15, Jesus responds to Ananias’s fear and objections by commanding him to go and by sharing his plans for Saul’s life. What is the Lord’s plan for Saul’s life? [*Saul later becomes the famous apostle Paul.*]
5. What happens in verses 17–20 as Ananias is obedient to Jesus’ call? How does Saul respond? What might this tell us about facing someone we don’t want to talk to but whom we feel God wants us to talk to?
6. In verses 21–22 what are the words used to describe people’s response to the message (Jesus is the Son of God, the Christ) and the messenger (Saul)? How is Saul’s life transformed?
7. Look back through the whole passage. Who has the power in this passage and who is reacting to that power? While most conversions are not as dramatic as Paul’s, how was yours similar? How did Jesus show himself to you? Was there an “Ananias” in your life?

In Closing:

Think again of your choice for “the most unlikely Christian.” From this passage, what have you learned that speaks to your doubts about their becoming a believer? Take a few minutes as a group to pray for the people you mentioned.

For further discussion:

Put yourself in Ananias’s place and imagine what he was feeling in this passage. We’re not all public preachers like Paul, but we are called to be witnesses and encouragers like Ananias. To whom can you be an “Ananias” this week? Is there a young Christian you can encourage to grow? Is there someone you need to challenge?

