



Today

refresh, refocus, renew

July/August 2023

ADVENTURES
WITH ABRAHAM

ALSO: DEEP SENSE OF AWE

Friends:

What comes to mind when you hear or see the phrase “the early church”?

Maybe you have heard about some of Jesus’ first followers whose stories are written in the book of Acts. Perhaps you have learned that these first-century believers were devoted “to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Or maybe you have heard about some of the miraculous ways the Holy Spirit worked in these followers of Jesus. During the month of August, Pastor Ron Baker helps us reflect on many of the key events in Acts, inviting us into “A Deep Sense of Awe.”



But first, in July, we’ll focus on the person of Abraham. The Bible describes him as “the father of all who believe” (Romans 4:11). And as Pastor Dan Jongsma leads us, we’ll consider some questions like these: How does Abraham’s faith serve as an example for us today? In what ways can we deepen our faith in God’s promises—and how they point us to Jesus? How can we avoid some of the mistakes Abraham made? And how can we learn to walk more closely with God, as Abraham learned in his life?

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God’s Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Kurt Selles

Today

July/August 2023

refresh, refocus, renew



**“Adventures with
Abraham”
Dan Jongsma**



**“Deep Sense of Awe”
Ron Baker**

TODAY (USPS 185-140),
Volume 73, Number 4,
published bimonthly by
ReFrame Ministries, formerly
Back to God Ministries
International, at 1700 28th
Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI
49508-1407. Periodicals postage
paid at Grand Rapids, Michigan,
and at additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes
to Today, 1700 28th Street SE,
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407.

Copyright © 2023, Reframe
Ministries. Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture
quotations in this publication
are from The Holy Bible, New
International Version®, NIV®.
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984,
2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by
permission. All rights reserved
worldwide.

Cover photo: Pixabay.com



**ReFrame
Ministries**

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

Managing Editor: Jeff Bulthuis
Executive Editor: Kurt Selles

Adventures with Abraham

Dan Jongsma

july

In Romans 4:11 we read that Abraham “is the father of all who believe” because he lived by faith in God. This month we will journey alongside Abraham as he learns how to walk by faith rather than by sight. We will learn that following the Lord on the great adventure of faith is what we are all created for.

Daniel Jongsma serves as an interim pastor in Fulton, Illinois. He has pastored congregations in Elmhurst and Fulton, Illinois; in Dearborn, Michigan; and in Nashville, Tennessee. Dan also served as a church planter in the Chicago area. He and his wife, Gloria, have three daughters and four grandchildren.

Deep Sense of Awe

Ron Baker

august

The book of Acts describes how the Christian church began and, more importantly, how the Holy Spirit of God made that happen. Many moments in Acts note a deep sense of awe as people witnessed the Spirit of God in action. Whether you are exploring faith, new to faith, or have been around faith a long time, we pray that reflecting on the work of the Spirit may ignite a passion in you to seek and more deeply know God.

Ron Baker is a pastor at Vitalpoint Church, which focuses on planting churches in small towns in Ontario. He is married and has two sons, two daughters-in-law, and two granddaughters. His passion is to connect God's Word to our everyday life.

FILLED WITH AWE

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.
—Acts 2:43

People can argue and debate faith, and they can talk about possible contradictions in the Bible, but a life transformed by Jesus is a powerful mystery that cannot be denied. It's a work of the Holy Spirit that can fill you with awe. With this in mind, let's explore sections of the Bible's book of Acts.

Acts tells the story of the beginning of the church built by Jesus Christ. It also shows how God, by his Spirit, was doing something new and powerful by coming to live within people whom he called to have new life in Christ. Luke, the writer of Acts, captures moments and events in the development of the church that brought a deep sense of awe.

As we look to Acts for inspiration, we do this not to try to revive the past. We look back to find a way forward as we embrace the possibility that God

by his Spirit is doing something new even today.

So, if you are new to the Christian faith, this can help to draw your heart and mind to the possibilities of what God can do. And if you have been a Christian for a while, this exercise may help to refresh your focus and imagination on the amazing things God can do in our lives and for his kingdom.

Lord and God, I long for more of you. I desire a deep sense of awe as I see you work and move in my life. Help me to set aside my ideas of how I think you work, and please renew my eyes, ears, and heart to sense what you want to do. Amen.

IMAGINING

After his suffering, he . . . gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.
—Acts 1:3

Jesus could have talked to his apostles about all kinds of things after he had risen from the grave. He could have talked about what it was like to have nails driven into his hands and feet, and what it was like to come back to life and breathe again.

While Jesus might have mentioned those things, we know that he especially talked with his closest followers about the kingdom of God. His entire three years in the public eye were all about proclaiming and pointing to God's kingdom and the full life it offers for everyone.

The kingdom of God means full life forever for all who believe in Jesus as the Savior whose death has paid for all our sin. And with this promise Jesus captured his followers' imagination.

He wanted to help them understand that what they were signing up for was not a stale form of religion, directed by laws and rituals, but a new movement of God's realm and reality that has entered human history through Jesus' suffering and resurrection.

Jesus knew that what captures our imagination will shape how we live—and, more importantly, what we are willing to die for.

He talked about the kingdom of God so that his followers would be prepared to have a deep sense of awe over what was about to happen.

Holy Spirit, please renew and grow my imagination of what the kingdom of God is and what it can do in and through my life. Amen.

NOT ALONE

"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

After capturing his followers' imagination with the kingdom of God, Jesus tells them, in effect, "I need you to be my witnesses here on earth. And here's the great thing—you will not be alone."

Jesus says that God's Spirit will come upon them and give them power to be his witnesses. He explains that God by his Spirit will be the source of their strength so that they won't have to do this work on their own.

Too often we think that in order to be a witness, we need to learn the right steps and know the right Scriptures so that we don't mess things up. And while all of that is a good idea, it's a great comfort to know that we are not alone in the mission of being witnesses to the living hope, Jesus.

Jesus' close group of followers knew about how God had told his prophets what to say in past generations. They had also seen Jesus do some powerful things. And now he was telling them that the Holy Spirit of God himself would empower them!

They must have felt a bit terrified but also confident, knowing they could go forward with the power and presence of God. This was the same God who had created the earth and brought Jesus back to life! And the same power is available to Jesus' followers today.

Spirit of God, thank you for living in me and giving me your power to witness for Jesus. Guide me in each moment you have given me today. Amen.

DEEPLY DEVOTED

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. —Acts 2:42

If you know a die-hard soccer fan, you know that they can be rather fanatical about their club. The way they talk, dress, and cheer is like they were on the pitch for the game. Through thick and thin a true fan stays true to their club, no matter what. A true soccer fan is a picture of what it means to be deeply devoted.

As the group of first-century, new believers in Jesus was being formed, they did something almost automatically. They turned their lives in a direction that would allow them to grow a resilient faith. They devoted themselves to this new way of life. The word *devoted* carries with it the idea of being glued to something, unable to be pulled apart.

When a person is devoted, they are not looking for the path of least resistance. When times get tough, they don't strive for

a comfortable and convenient life. People who are deeply devoted don't allow their feelings to be the main indicator of how they define their faith.

The early church shows us something very important about human nature: what we are devoted to forms our lives, shapes our thinking, and develops new patterns of life and friendship.

God, life can be so tough at times. There are days when we are not sure if we can even move forward, so please give us the strength and the will to be devoted to you and your plan. Amen.

THE APOSTLES' TEACHING

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. . . .

—Acts 2:42

Not long ago I heard someone say that if you believe you can possess truth as your own, you will be argumentative and defensive. However, if you realize that truth is something you point to, you will be kind and compassionate because you know truth is for everyone.

If there is one thing that has polarized our society, it is personal expressions of truth. If you are a follower of Jesus, or if you are becoming a follower, you need to know that you are called to be devoted to the truth that belongs not to you but to God.

The very reason that Jesus' early followers held on to and continued in the apostles' teaching was that the apostles had been with Jesus and had heard the truth from his very lips. Jesus' followers knew that these teachings brought life itself.

When I look at the world around me, I see so much confusion and chaos. Maybe you see some of the same wasteland.

As people who are trying to find our way through the wasteland of confusion and chaos today, we need to find our anchor in the foundational truth of Jesus so that we don't build our lives on the ever-changing sand of society.

The early believers' devotion to the apostles' teaching gave them a deep sense of awe for what would lead them to live with holy reverence for God and his Word.

Father, knowing what is true can be hard. Please guide me to your truth so that I may stand strong in this world of confusion and chaos. Amen.

I NEED YOU, AND YOU NEED ME

They devoted themselves . . . to fellowship. . . .

—Acts 2:42

It's important to know that we don't just "go" to church but instead are part of the church. We might go to a hockey game or to a store, but church is different. If we follow Jesus, we are a part of his body, his people, the church.

Jesus' early followers were a diverse group. They came from many countries and from all walks of life. It was probably difficult for them to unite together and learn to be God's newly formed people. And yet they found a way to be devoted to one another, to be together in fellowship—in Christ, through the power of his Spirit.

What I love about the fellowship of Jesus' followers is that they were there for one another. Their lives would not have been easy with all the political, cultural, and religious divisions in the Roman Empire. But they were able to find their

way by being there for each other, in Christ.

When someone was struggling, hurting, or even coming off the rails in their faith, there was someone to encourage them. Though we all have a tendency to try to deal with our struggles on our own, we need to learn to lean into community. Maybe we don't want to bother others, but in our times of struggle we need to run toward instead of away from our community of faith so that they can care for us.

Jesus, give me the strength and courage to live life in community. Help me to lean into your people around me and to let others do that with me. Amen.

TABLE TIME

They devoted themselves . . . to the breaking of bread. . . .

—Acts 2:42

There's something about sitting around a table to share a meal. When our family is all together, we often have deep, rich conversations. And we have joyful fun—I recall that when our first granddaughter was becoming expressive, we all started cheering with our hands in the air as she did the same.

As Jesus' followers devoted themselves to breaking bread together, there was a sense of understanding that they were a part of something greater than themselves. It was a reminder that they were part of the kingdom of God that Jesus had taught about.

Being together to break bread is a way of revealing that we are a part of a new kind of family as well. This family has a centerpiece, and his name is Jesus. As we sit together in community, breaking bread together and remembering Jesus,

whether in a large gathering or a small one, we look around that space with an understanding that Jesus calls us brothers and sisters.

In this picture of the table we need to understand that none of us deserves to be at the table breaking bread, and yet we are all invited and welcomed because of Jesus.

Jesus spoke some powerfully prophetic words when he said, "Do this in remembrance of me." He knew that we would need to remember who and what we are a part of.

Jesus, thank you for the power of the table. In your grace you have given us the greatest example of your good news by welcoming us and reminding us to remember you. Amen.

NOT A GENIE IN A BOTTLE

They devoted themselves . . . to prayer.

—Acts 2:42

I don't know about you, but this one is really hard. They devoted themselves to *prayer*? I'm a pastor, and I often am expected to pray, but that can be so hard at times. I can be a few minutes into my time of prayer, and boom—I'm thinking about mowing the lawn. It's easy to get distracted when we pray.

And yet this group of early believers devoted themselves to prayer! This means they consistently and regularly were going to God. But were they doing what we often do: bringing our lists of needs and concerns? Or were they doing something else?

I talk to lots of people about prayer, and I often hear this: I tried praying, and it didn't work. I asked God to heal my aunt's illness, and he didn't answer. And so on. But is that what prayer is about? Well, that's a part of it, but there is

more. Jesus' early followers recognized that their source of strength and hope was God. For them, prayer was about laying down their lives before God and being open to serve him in whatever he called them to do.

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that God is like a genie in a bottle, as if we could just pray and be granted whatever we wished for.

When it comes to prayer, what God truly wants is to hear about what is going on in our hearts—and then for us to listen.

God, help me to grow in my understanding of prayer. By your Spirit, help me to connect with you, talk with you, and listen to you. Guide me to follow you faithfully. In Jesus, Amen.

A STRANGE THING HAPPENED

They broke bread . . . and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily. . . —Acts 2:46-47

Have you ever gone to a show or a movie and laughed so hard that your face hurt? That has happened to me. There's this one guy in my life who can make me laugh really hard too. For whatever reason, when he's around, there's often great laughter and even joy.

As Jesus' early followers began to emerge, something was happening that caught the attention of others: joy rose up from among them.

Their lives were marked by Jesus, clearly seen in their deep devotion and great joy. Acts makes clear that they met daily, worshiped regularly, and had glad and generous hearts. Jesus' followers had this internal joy marked with gladness, and it was not for themselves. Their outward-facing generosity brought joy into the lives of the people around them.

Maybe when Jesus had taught them about the kingdom of God, he had shared how exciting and strange it would be to have so much joy that people would wonder and want what they had. Luke reports that they grew in favor with all the people and that the Lord added many to their numbers.

Ask yourself if this joy is real for you. There are times when life can be hard and we can get discouraged. But it can also help to look deeper and see that joy grows when we are glad and generous as we look forward in hope.

Lord, I want to grow in my understanding of what it means to be marked by joy. Even when life is tough, mark my life with great joy in you. Amen.

WHAT? A MAN IS HEALED?

"In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

—Acts 3:6

Sometimes when we read the Bible, we can miss little phrases that make a transition. The beginning of our reading today provides a transition that leads into a new experience of God's kingdom. It says, "One day Peter and John . . ." This will take us into a deeper sense of awe as we see God working and moving to bring more and more people to himself. Let's savor each moment as it brings wonder, inspiration, and joy.

It was a regular day as Peter and John headed to the temple to pray, and then things became really irregular. A lame man asked for money, and Peter offered him something completely different. He offered him Jesus and healing all in the same moment.

Wait—what happened here? The man was healed in the name of Jesus, both spiritually and physically. This might

make us uncomfortable, but when God chooses to reveal who he is and what his kingdom is about, he can do powerful things!

We may not always see healings like this, but when we see families restored, freedom from an addiction, and other amazing turnarounds, we can sense the wonder of the new life Jesus offers.

Moments like this show us the power of God's kingdom. They give us a glimpse of what the Lord came to do and what he will do when he fully restores all things.

God, help me to see the power of the resurrection. Open my eyes and heart to the new things you are doing in and through and around me. Amen.

NO ONE LEFT OUT

God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. —Acts 4:33-34

As people were gripped by the reality of new life in Jesus, something significant was happening among them: no one was left out. "There were no needy persons among them." Can you imagine what that was like?

Think about being on the receiving end. As hard as it can be to ask for help, I'm sure that people felt relief, knowing their needs would be supplied.

And what about the people who were giving? The ability to help meet the needs of people without expectations must have been contagious. People literally sold their property to help meet the needs of others. Talk about being devoted to one another.

In our Western culture today, we tend to struggle with this concept of social living. If we help someone out, will they take advantage and expect us

to keep on giving? How will we be able to say no at some point?

Or could it be that God's kingdom doesn't work that way?

Maybe we are called to show God's heart by caring for and meeting each other's needs, and maybe in doing so we will reflect the light of Jesus.

Imagine what would happen if we, the church, lived each day with this kind of generosity. I'm sure that people outside the church would take notice and become curious.

Holy Spirit, make me sensitive to the needs of the people around me. Give me the courage not to wait until someone asks for help but to step in when you nudge me to do so. Amen.

GAINING MOMENTUM

The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. . . . More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.
—Acts 5:12-14

When God begins to do a new thing, nothing can stop him. Forces of this world may try, but nothing can ultimately stop the momentum God creates.

The reporting of signs and wonders can make some of us uncomfortable. I know it does that for me because I wasn't brought up in that type of environment. However, God used signs and wonders to give evidence of his kingdom coming into reality.

Though we might struggle a bit with these events, they can help us grasp the miracle of a changed life through the power of the resurrected Lord. When your life, or mine, is deeply transformed by the reality of God's kingdom, we want others to experience it too.

Read verse 14 again and reflect on it.

Multitudes of people were being reached. This movement of Jesus was gaining momentum that would keep on going to the present day and beyond. In those early days, signs and wonders helped to reinforce the powerful new reality God was bringing into this world.

As you take some time to reflect on all this, ask God to deepen your awareness of his power. Think about where and how you have seen God work in the past. Consider being stretched by asking God to give you his power today.

Jesus, you did many miraculous things among the people you met and taught. Help me to see the miracles you are doing today. Amen.

TENSION IN THE CAMP

"Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them."
—Acts 6:3

We don't often enjoy tension. Whether it's in an organization, a business, a family, a friendship, or even a church, tension can really mess with things. But what if we can refocus the tension and see if it creates a new opportunity?

Things were getting a bit tense in the fast-growing group of Jesus' followers. Feelings were hurt, some people were left out, and some of them began to complain. Another word for this is "grumbling." If you have heard the story of God's people wandering in the desert after being freed from Egypt, you know that it did not take long for them to start grumbling (Exodus 16).

What unfolds in this moment in Acts is an opportunity to decentralize the responsibilities of serving. The community has grown so large that it's time to

appoint leaders who can help take care of some needs that aren't being met.

When we take time to sit in the tension, we are able to see new opportunities. It's easy to grumble. It's also easy to find some people to grumble with. But if we step back and look at things from another angle, we might see an opportunity to start something beautiful.

Too often in my life I have let the grumbling get in the way of what God may want to teach or reveal to me. How can we reframe what we are going through? What new thing might arise from the tension?

God, please help us break free from complaining, and let us see what new things you are trying to teach us. Amen.

UNDENIABLE COMMUNITY

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.
—Acts 6:7

Look at the last part of today's verse again: "a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." This had never caught my attention before.

I had to do some digging to better understand the impact of this "large number of priests." There were about 18,000 priests living among the Jews at this time. Wow! Their role was to serve in the temple, an actual physical space. Day after day they had priestly duties for taking care of the needs of the people around them. The task was enormous and exhausting.

A large number of those priests were drawn to faith in Christ because they saw a group of people sharing the load of caring for the poor among them—and this was clearly not being done out of obligation. Jesus' followers were doing this out of genuine love. That falls

directly in line with being "devoted," a trait we pondered a few days ago. As Jesus' followers served diligently to meet people's needs, many of the priests also found their way into this new community of faith.

Of course, the church needs to balance its inward care with reaching out to others, but if the church becomes known as a community marked by care and love, that is something beautiful that others want too.

Lord, what role do you want me to fill in your community? How can my gifts and passions help to shape the community of faith so that others may come to know Jesus? Amen.

PEACE IN SUFFERING

Yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. —Acts 7:57-58

Stephen had just spelled out the story of God's promise to Abraham. He explained how God had made a covenant with his people and had fulfilled it (Acts 7:2-50). Then he charged the high priest and the rest of the ruling establishment with the murder of "the Righteous One," Jesus Christ.

And at that moment Stephen's day got much worse. The religious rulers were enraged. They were so angry that they dragged him out of the city and stoned him.

Have you ever seen someone going through a tough time and wondered, "I don't know what I would do if that happened to me"? Here's a wonder and awe moment in the story of Stephen.

As they pressed him, Stephen understood the power of God's presence with him. He saw

heaven open, and he found comfort.

When we face tough times or when it feels like the world is against us, that can actually be a moment when we can know the peace that surpasses all understanding. A time like that can be hard and trying, but it can also be an opportunity to draw close to Jesus.

People have said that perhaps the best question to ask in tough times is not so much "Why?" as "What are you revealing to me, God?"

O God, help me to see a bad day or a tough time as an opportunity to draw close to you. I often fall prey to focusing only on myself. Instead, help me to see you and to serve you faithfully. Amen.

WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT IT

"How can I [understand]," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?"
—Acts 8:31

I wonder if Philip saw that moment coming. The Spirit of God surely did.

Some years ago our family lived in a community of town-houses. We knew we were there for a greater reason than simply to raise our two young sons. We were called to be an example to the people around us of what Jesus was like.

We prayed for various families around us. We hoped to gain a sense of whom God was working on. One day, though, a neighbor from a ways down the row of houses stopped my wife and asked, "Can I ask you some questions about church and faith?"

We didn't see that coming! We hadn't prayed for her. But that didn't mean God wasn't working on her.

In fact, God is working on all kinds of people all of the time.

He may even be working on a person you least expect. So don't be surprised when that coworker who annoys you sits down at the lunch table to ask what's different about you. Or when a classmate who acts like they have it all together asks you to pray for them. Somehow they know you have a connection with God.

What would happen if we began every day knowing that God has already been at work in the people around us, some of whom we might talk with that day? How could that change the way you go about your day?

God, you work in mysterious ways. Give us eyes and ears and the right words to say so that we can be your witnesses everywhere each day. Amen.

PERSECUTOR TO PROCLAIMER

"Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on [Jesus'] name?"
—Acts 9:21

Maybe you have heard of the apostle Paul, but did you know he was also named Saul and had a nasty past? He felt that he was doing God's work by putting Christians in prison, and he even watched approvingly as Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 7:58). Saul began using his Greek name, Paul, when he became a witness for Jesus to Greek-speaking Gentiles (Acts 13:9).

Despite all of Saul's nasty intentions, Jesus stopped him in his tracks and turned his life around. That was shocking to many of the people who had known Saul before. The Lord changed his life and gave him a new purpose. God would use him powerfully to invite Gentiles (non-Jewish people) into his kingdom.

We can feel spiteful sometimes about people who cause trouble in our lives, but the power

of Jesus can transform them from being angry, hateful, and vengeful to sharing God's love, kindness, and peace.

Imagine how it felt for people who knew the persecutor and then saw him preaching about Jesus as the Savior (Messiah). Saul was proclaiming the grace and power of the one he had fought hardest against.

This is the power of the good news!

God, search me and find any areas in my life that you need to turn around. Help me to see how you want to repurpose my life for your glory. Amen.

SHE'S A BEAUTY

The church . . . enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.
—Acts 9:31

I remember going to visit a town near our home and being surprised to find a Corvette show going on. I was excited to check out all the beautiful cars on display. From older 'Vettes to new ones, those cars were something to behold.

When I think of the church (no, not like a Corvette), I think of it as something of beauty. Sure, it has scratches and dents, and of course it has an ugly side because it's made of people—but I think the church can be so stunning.

When Saul (Paul) became a follower of Jesus, he was committed to making sure the church was something to behold.

This verse for us today is worth reading a few times. The newly formed church of Jesus was a place of peace and was being built up. I think of a high-rise building being built floor by

floor—and before you know it, the beauty is revealed. The people (the church) walked in the fear of God and multiplied.

The building-up of the church wasn't about slick programs or clever preaching. The hearts of the people were aligned with God, and they were encouraged by the Holy Spirit. They had a deep sense of awe as they walked in step with the Lord, and they made sure God got the glory.

God, forgive us for seeing the church through the wrong lens at times. Guide us to focus on the right things that will help us grow. Amen.

SPIRIT-LED MISSION

While Peter was still speaking . . . the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.
—Acts 10:44

One thing we learn from passages like this one in the book of Acts is that Peter and other believers did not create these moments. It was all the work of the Holy Spirit. Remember when we said earlier that Acts is all about the Holy Spirit? Well, we see the Spirit on full display here.

Peter and the others were simply led by the Spirit into these moments of pure awe. Who could have imagined the Spirit filling Gentiles so powerfully here that they began “speaking in tongues and praising God”?

We need to consider that if we try to create a certain kind of worship experience, or we aim for certain results by just following some model of doing church, we are relying on our own strength and understanding. But if we rely on the Spirit for direction, there is great power. It makes me smile that

in this story Peter, who was a guy who liked to make things happen, had very little to do with the outpouring of power here. He was simply being a witness, and while he “was still speaking,” the Spirit of God came on the scene with life-changing power.

Surely there are times when we need simply to trust that God has a better idea or plan, and we need to be open to the leading and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is where awe resides.

God, too often I try to make things happen in my own strength and my creativity. Help me to trust that you have a better plan for your amazing work in people's lives. Amen.

BOLD MOVE

Some of them . . . began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.
—Acts 11:20

Sometimes, when you find yourself in a moment of opportunity, you need to make a bold move. After Stephen was martyred, the believers scattered. It may seem odd, but that is one way the good news began to spread into other regions. God is so powerful that he can bring good results even out of bad things that happen.

Today, many of us don't look at persecution in a way like that. We tend to think of it as something that will ruin or destroy faith. But as we can see in this passage, the church can thrive despite persecution—and this still happens in parts of the world today.

The point of this passage is that some believers, led by the Spirit, made bold moves and proclaimed the good news to people outside the faith. Their boldness was not of them-

selves; it was due to the presence of God in their lives.

When we face tough times, we often need to step back and trust that God will create the opportunity for us to step in and be bold. Sure, it might seem like a risk at the moment, but it might otherwise be more of a risk not to take the bold step.

As the Spirit of God nudges us in our Christian living, we get to know more of his work in us and through us. It takes time to discern such moments. It might also take wisdom from others to speak into our situation and ask, "What is keeping you from making a bold move?"

Father, fill us with your Spirit so that we might be bold—not in our own strength or doing, but in yours. Amen.

DON'T FIX IT; PRAY

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.
—Acts 12:5

When there is a problem, I tend to go into fix-it mode. I want to find the solution and make it happen.

Things were intense for the church in its early days, and we've been exploring some of that. We have seen today that King Herod was cruel and cunning. He had put pressure on the church and had killed the apostle James, and he liked how that made him popular with the people who had gotten Jesus crucified. So Herod arrested Peter and put him in prison too. It's almost comical that Herod used four squads of soldiers to guard him.

Did you notice the church's response? Did they jump into a strategy meeting on how to get Peter out of prison? Nope! They did what came naturally to them—they prayed. Don't you love that? And it's not a prayer qualified with the word

"just." We sometimes do that when we pray, "God we just ask" But these people earnestly sought God with passion.

Sometimes when I'm having a tough moment, I try to sort things out in my own understanding. Prayer gets sidelined as an afterthought. I wonder what it would be like if we grew a response muscle that moved us to turn to God first. I'm sure it would help us see things differently. Maybe we wouldn't be so overwhelmed. Maybe anxiety and worry would have less of a pull if we stopped trying to fix it first.

God, may turning to you be my first response in tough times. Forgive me when I don't boldly make my requests to you. Amen.

STOP PLAYING GOD

They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

—Acts 12:22-23

Here Acts helps us again to stand in awe of God. King Herod had set himself up on his throne like a god. What he wore and what he said would have prompted the people to say that he was a god, not a man. And let's not forget that they wanted something from him: peace and food.

Well, the king did not give due praise to God, so he was struck down and eaten by worms.

But let's be careful not to pass judgment on King Herod so quickly. We may not have a throne to sit on or royal robes to wear. We may not even have one person following us. But sometimes we play God in our own lives.

Excessive worry is one way we do that. Worry is a signal that we are taking over God's role of being God in our lives. It's

as though we hold tight to this thing as if we have control over it—but of course we do not.

As anyone who worries excessively can tell you, there is very little contentment and joy in living that way. When we try to sit on the throne of our lives, taking God's rightful place and not opening ourselves to trust in him, we set ourselves up for trouble. Though we might not be struck down or eaten by worms, we can endanger our very souls. We need to stop playing God and let him guide us into full life.

God, you are better at running my life than I am. Help me to give you my life today. Amen.

THIS BEFORE THAT

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said . . .
—Acts 13:2

There are subtle things written in Acts that we can easily miss while reading it quickly. I miss important details at times, and maybe that happens to you too. But then there are moments when the Spirit helps us see things that we never noticed before.

Note that in the church at Antioch the believers were worshiping and fasting, and that the Spirit revealed to them that Barnabas and Saul were called. Then, after this was revealed, the believers fasted and prayed and laid hands on the two before sending them off.

The word “they” is crucial in this passage. Prophets and teachers are identified, but the community of believers is mentioned too. There’s something powerful that happens when the community of faith is together.

If you are part of a church, you know that churches often try to model themselves after other churches. There is nothing wrong with learning from another church model, but it can then be easy to try to go in your own strength to make it happen.

This community was set on worshiping, fasting, and praying—and as they did so, the Spirit revealed an important mission. Notice too that they laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul. The Spirit-led community sent them off with a communal blessing to serve in the Lord’s unfolding plan for his kingdom.

Father, as we worship, pray, and fast, show us your mission for our lives. In your strength, we want to do what you call us to do. Amen.

NO LIMITS

The Gentiles . . . were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

—Acts 13:48

When we go to a gathering where there's a lot of good food, we often say, "That's a great spread." It points out that a great feast is spread across the table, and we look forward to enjoying it.

Acts records for us that Paul and Barnabas were spreading the good news of Jesus across a wide geographical area, and many people were experiencing the love and grace of Jesus. They were on a mission, from God, to spread the good news to the Gentiles, people of other nations beyond the Jewish people, and the Gentiles were receiving the good news with great joy.

The power of the good news of God's love for us, given through the life and death of Jesus and his resurrection, cannot be contained. When Jesus rose from the dead and walked

out of the tomb, he proved that as much as we think we can predict how God is going to work, we can't. We can't even assume *how* God will work, because when we do that, we limit our ability to see and participate in God's work in our lives.

Paul and Barnabas understood that the good news was for all people, and many embraced the truth. Even when there was opposition, the disciples were filled with excitement as the word of God spread.

Father, expand our understanding of how you want to go beyond the limits we tend to set. Fill us with your Spirit and with joy as we learn to follow you. Amen.

TELLING A BETTER STORY

They reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. —Acts 14:27

I once heard a speaker say that if your teenager is disconnected or uninterested in being part of the family, give them a better story to be a part of. If you have teenagers, that may be worth thinking about.

In this section we see Paul and Barnabas sharing stories of transformation. After returning to Antioch, they gathered the community of believers and “reported all that God had done through them.” In other words, they shared with passion and excitement the things that the Spirit of God was doing.

Part of having a deep sense of awe in our life with God is knowing that we are part of a better story. We might even say that continuing to tell the stories of God’s work will help to keep the mission going. After Jesus had sent his disciples out in pairs to spread the good news about him, he brought them

together again and had them share stories of what had happened (Luke 10:1-24). Stories have the power to make our faith real, and they prompt us to live with our eyes open to see where God is working.

As we grow in faith, we begin to understand that we are part of a greater story that needs to be shared with others. And when we are down and discouraged, stories can help us regain our joy.

God, thank you for inviting me into your story. Help me to share with humility and boldness how you are working in my life and in the lives of others. Amen.

A MATTER OF THE HEART

"God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted [the Gentiles] by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us."

—Acts 15:8

Tension was building as God continued to expand his kingdom. Reports were coming in that Gentiles were becoming believers in Christ, and then some leaders from Judea began teaching that people could not be saved in Christ unless they were circumcised according to the law of Moses.

Actually, those leaders had an "us and them" attitude about faith, and they wanted clear markers to show who was included and who was not. But God had other plans.

Thankfully, cooler minds prevailed, and the church's leaders saw the truth that all believers are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, and that circumcision is no longer required. Salvation into God's kingdom is a matter of the heart.

As the work of the Spirit (by which every believer in Christ

is sealed) produces fruit in us, we gradually take on the character and behavior of Christ. The Spirit works in us and changes our hearts. Having an outward mark does not change our hearts. Only the Spirit of God can do that.

The gospel cuts to the heart of who we are, and by his power at work inside of us the Lord makes something beautiful out of our lives.

God, thank you for the work you are doing in our hearts. May your love and grace overflow from within us to bring your goodness and fruitfulness into the lives of others. Amen.

EARN THE RIGHT

They took him . . . to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?"
—Acts 17:19

Something special happens when someone earns the right to share an insight or opinion. Sadly, some people don't seem to understand that there are times when you have to earn the right before you can share your opinion.

In his visit to Athens, Paul was brilliant. As a follower of Christ, he had become distressed that the city of Athens was full of idols. And the Spirit gave Paul some insight into what was going on there. The city took pride in being a hotbed of ideas, and people engaged in the worship of all kinds of gods (represented by the idols). In fact, many people "spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas."

So Paul began to reason with people in the marketplace. He had taken time to listen to

them, and they were intrigued by his new message about Jesus. They said they wanted to hear more, even though they didn't fully understand what he was saying. In this way Paul earned the right to share about the one true God, and many people believed.

It can be easy to get mad at the world, to be frustrated with how things are swinging one way or the other—but getting angry and combative is not the answer. Paul walked into the midst of a confusion of ideas and earned the right to share about God by connecting with people and gaining a sense of what mattered to them.

God, help us to understand the world around us and to share who you are and what you have done for us all. Amen.

FAITH IS NOT A MIXED BAG

Many of those who believed . . . openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly.
—Acts 19:18-19

Lisa is a person I know who came to faith in Jesus Christ from a New Age background. In her early days of following Jesus, she tried to mix many layers of the New Age movement in with her faith. It didn't work. She would constantly be confused and lacking in her understanding of following Jesus. She finally found freedom when she rid herself of those mixed-in practices.

Jesus' early followers knew that in order to fully surrender to him, they would need to get rid of everything that could distract from the work of the Spirit in their lives. In Ephesus, new believers who had practiced sorcery and witchcraft burned all of their scrolls in front of everyone.

People in many cultures attempt to mix other religious ideas and thoughts with faith

in Christ, saying, "Really, what harm is there in that?"

It can also be tempting to mix the Christian faith with superstition or reading a daily horoscope for guidance. But if we do that, we fail to realize that we are not fully trusting in God and his Spirit to guide us and to provide us full life.

When we approach faith as a mixed bag, we water down the power of the good news of life.

Dear God, if anything in our lives misleads us from following you, help us to get rid of it. Guide us into real, full living each day, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

COUNT MY LIFE AS NOTHING

My only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me. . . .
—Acts 20:24

Have you thought about what can hold people back from a deep sense of awe?

We could answer that question in a general way by saying that sin is what keeps us from enjoying deep, full life with God. But have you also wondered about how subtle sin can be? Sometimes we don't realize how much our sinful tendencies can deceive us.

For example, I've noticed one thing that has a strong hold on many, many people: individualism. If you live in the West, you know that this shows up in a phrase like "Do whatever makes you happy." I'm all for being happy, but what happens when that is taken too far? We end up putting ourselves first in everything we do. One of the hardest addictions to recover from is the selfie life.

Paul taught that he counted his life as nothing in comparison

to what he had gained by following Jesus. His deep sense of awe was grounded in setting aside his own plans, dreams, and desires so that he could devote himself to God's greater purpose for his life.

Paul was not consumed with comfort or convenience, and he found contentment in focusing on the life Jesus had in store for him.

The greatest battle we might face in developing faith can be in holding back from giving Jesus everything in our life.

Jesus, thank you for giving your whole life for us so that we can have life to the full. Forgive us for seeking a convenient, comfortable faith. Help us to live the life you have called us to. Amen.

DEEP SENSE OF AWE

"Now get up and stand on your feet. . . . I am sending you to [the Gentiles] to open their eyes . . . so that they may receive forgiveness of sins. . . ."

—Acts 26:16-18

Consider your own story of faith. One of the ways you can know the awe of God is through your story. Maybe you came to Jesus out of a life of poverty and pain. Maybe you think your story is less than exciting because you grew up in the church and have always been a part of it.

Whatever the case, you have a story to share because it's really about God's story happening through you. In all your struggles, celebrations, griefs, and joys, God has been telling his story of grace in and through you.

When given the opportunity, Paul shared his story. One of the main reasons a personal story is so powerful is that no one can argue against the way God has chosen to work in and through you. Think of moments when you had to trust

God with a loved one who was sick, or when you were not sure how to pay a debt and God provided for you. Or maybe you thought your marriage was at the point of no return, but God brought it back.

People can debate theology and doctrine, but they cannot argue against the awesome work of God in and through a transformed life.

May we not lose sight of the power of whom we serve and that we are called to be his people. Let's embrace and celebrate the awe and wonder of God's power each day.

God, undo me today!
Softens my heart and bring
me freedom so that I may
see and know the wonder
of who you are. Amen.

BACK TO WHERE IT STARTED

[Jesus] appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. . . . He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But 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 1:3, 7-8

The book of Acts is not simply about the birth of the church or even the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, giving great power. Acts reveals the extension of Jesus' work on earth, in which he uses not his human body but a different body made up of his followers—the church. That body, known today as the worldwide church of Christ, aims to live out and continue the ongoing work of Jesus as he grows his kingdom here on the earth.

Jesus hinted at this when he taught his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). When Jesus met with his followers, gave proof of his resurrection, and spoke with them

about the kingdom of God, he was helping them understand that he was creating not a new religion but a movement that would expand around the world through them.

Thankfully the Holy Spirit gave them understanding, and we are here today as part of his church. Christ is our head, and we are his body, serving God in this world as the heart, hands, and feet of the Lord Jesus, who promises full life for all who believe in him.

Jesus, thank you for wanting to use me as part of your work in this world. Help me to serve you as you draw others to yourself. Amen.



GROUNDWORK

— BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR LIFE —

Groundwork is a half-hour weekly audio program for radio and podcast that digs deeply into scripture as the foundation for our lives. Join pastors Scott Hozzee and Darrell Delaney each week as they unpack the richness of the Bible in casual conversation and apply it with insight for today's world.



Listen on our website or your favorite podcast platform.

GroundworkOnline.com

CANADA POSTES

POST



CANADA



Postage paid

Port payé

Personalized
Mail

Courrier
personnalisé

1946358

RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED
PORT DE RETOUR GARANTI

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Ministries

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

3475 Mainway
Burlington, ON L7M 1A9
P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8

905-336-2920

info@todaydevotional.com

www.todaydevotional.com

facebook.com/todaydevotional

Periodicals postage paid at
Grand Rapids, Mich., and at
additional mailing offices.

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Ministries

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

1700 28th Street SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407
800-626-3060
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional
