

The Acts of the Apostles – a daily Bible guide

Week Two

Week 2 Optional Family Activities

At home:

- **With younger kids:** You might draw pictures of the four or five main events stemming from Saul's experience on the Damascus road (see Acts 9:1-25) and add them to your pictorial timeline.
 - Saul asking for letters telling people to throw Jesus' followers in jail
 - Jesus meeting Saul on his horse on the road to Damascus
 - Ananias laying hands on Saul to bring his sight back, baptizing him, and feeding him
 - Saul believing in Jesus and preaching, "He is the Son of God!"
 - Saul being let down the walls of the city in a basket
- **With older kids:** Continue to track the growth of the church and the spread of Jesus' followers around the ancient Mediterranean region on your wall map. Events in the following passages are ones you will probably want to highlight: Acts 6:7, Acts 8:1, Acts 8:4-5, Acts 8:26-40, Acts 9:1-6, Acts 9:31-35, Acts 9:42-43. Label each location mentioned and its significance (example: Jerusalem – Stephen stoned; most believers run away to Judea and Samaria).
- **Conversation topics with older kids might include:** What things are worth suffering for, perhaps even worth dying for? Considering Saul's transformation, do you think people can really change?

Monday, March 13th

Read [Acts 5:12-42](#).

Points of Interest:

- 'many miraculous signs and wonders among the people'—in last week's passages, the apostles perform one miraculous healing, and it gets them into trouble with the Council. In response, they ask God to do more miracles; and that's exactly what they get. In fact, the power of the Holy Spirit rests so strongly on the apostles that, apparently, even Peter's shadow is performing miracles.

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- ‘an angel of the Lord came at night, opened the gates of the jail, and brought them out’—Peter and John, when commanded to stop by the Council, invoked the higher authority of God. Here, this angel gives a clear sign that God is indeed with them: the Council throws them in jail, but God releases them and commands them to go back immediately to what they had been doing. God overturns the verdict of the Council.
- ‘the men they had jailed were out in the Temple’—I imagine that this ruined the effect that the Council was hoping for. They’d put the apostles in jail overnight to give them a chance to think about the repercussions of what they’d been doing. But instead of dragging them into court after a terrifying night in jail, the Council loses their prisoners, only to find them unperturbedly doing what they’d been doing when they were arrested. In the face of the Holy Spirit’s power, these powerful men appear to be powerless and rather foolish.
- ‘You may even find yourselves fighting against God’—in point of fact, they have been fighting against God ever since they tried to shut Jesus up, and—as Gamaliel predicts—they have not been able to stop him. They’ve even had someone killed before, only to see it expand Jesus’ message rather than stopping it.
- ‘rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus’—interestingly, they are not rejoicing at the fact that Gamaliel’s advice has allowed them to escape. They are rejoicing at the fact that they have been allowed to suffer. Not so long ago, they all ran away in order to avoid being brought to this very courtroom with Jesus. The apostles had followed Jesus, but weren’t capable of following him all the way to jail. Here, they are given a second chance. This time, the Holy Spirit has given them the boldness to persevere. They have just been given the opportunity to follow Jesus one step further. For Jesus, suffering led to exaltation; God put him in the place of honor at his right hand. The disciples have been given the privilege of sharing in that honor.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* The apostles have become tireless in spreading the good news about Jesus. Ask God to give you a new vigor in sharing good things you’ve gotten from Jesus’ with others. Ask God to follow your words with power, actually bringing life to the people who listen to you.
- *Through your five:* Ask God to make the lives of your five a testimonial to his reality and his power. Pray for a deep, true, and visible transformation in the lives of your five, one that shows that God is truly at work.
- *Through our church:* Pray for our relationship with the wider community. Ask that God would give us a good reputation with the community, particularly with our neighborhood. Pray that the good reputation would come from the fact that we bring healing, freedom, and other good things from God to the people in our neighborhood.

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Tuesday, March 14th

Read [Acts 6](#).

Points of Interest:

- ‘Those who spoke Greek’—these would be Jews who were born and raised somewhere else in the eastern Roman Empire, rather than in the Palestinian region. Some of them may have come for the feasts and ended up staying in Jerusalem when they became followers of Jesus. Others may have lived their lives in other cities, but retired to Jerusalem—it may have been a common desire among pious Greek-speaking Jews to end their lives in the holy city of Jerusalem (Wagner p. 138).
- ‘their widows were being discriminated against’—the elderly, unless wealthy, would have been largely dependent upon the social network of extended families to provide for them. The Greek-speaking widows, being far from home, are separated from these social networks and therefore could be more dependent on the community of believers—it would be their only social network, their family away from family. The discrimination against the Greek-speaking widows is probably not intentional. The apostles are all Hebrew-speaking Jews. They are probably simply more familiar with the other Hebrew-speakers. The language barrier probably also plays a part in keeping the needs of the Greek-speaking widows from being made known as efficiently to the apostles. To make matters more complicated, it is highly possible that the Greek-speakers have been giving a disproportionately large amount of money to the common pool from which the apostles are drawing. The fact that they are able to leave their homes to travel to or move to Jerusalem may mean that they are on average wealthier than the Hebrew-speakers (Wagner p. 138). For instance, Barnabas, the one named example of a generous giver, is a Greek-speaker. To sum up, the Greek-speakers are quite possibly giving more toward the common pot, have a higher proportion of elderly widows in need of the community’s help, and are under-represented in the distribution of the community’s resources.
- ‘not administering a food program’—this statement from the apostles does not necessarily mean that they considered the food program unimportant. What it does show is that things have reached a point where the apostles can’t do it all. Up until now, preaching, teaching, and food distribution have all been part of the job description of the twelve. This situation makes clear that the community has become too large and too complex for them to do everything well. They could put their efforts toward repairing the problems with the food distribution; but if they did so, they would no longer have the time to preach or teach—which Jesus had commanded them to do. Leaving things as they were—with the Greek-speakers being discriminated against—or stopping the food distribution program are also not options, though. They can’t stop their preaching in order to serve the poor, but it would be contrary to their message to preach at the

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- expense of the poor. For the kingdom of God to continue to advance, the only option is for the twelve to share their job with others.
- ‘among yourselves’—this probably refers specifically to the Greek-speakers. The apostles respond to those who have brought the complaint by putting them in charge of the program. It’s also possible that the entire community is involved in the selection process, in which case the entire community decides to put the situation in the hands of Greek-speakers. The names and what we know of the hometowns of the seven chosen men indicates that they are all Greek-speakers.
 - ‘in ever-widening circles’—the expansion of the community’s leadership team and the resolution of the discrimination against the Greek-speakers leads to a new phase of growth in numbers and influence. It might be expected that one of the circles of expansion would be among the Greek-speakers, but surprisingly the group that is particularly mentioned is the priests. These priests are probably not the top-level priests who were on the Council, but rather the lower-order priests of whom there would be many in Jerusalem. Perhaps the way the problem with the widows is resolved is particularly impressive to these priests, who would probably play some role in the Temple’s own distribution to the poor.
 - ‘Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs’—Stephen and the other six were particularly chosen to be in charge of the food distribution, but very quickly his ministry expands into teaching and preaching as well.
 - ‘from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia’—these are other Greek-speaking Jews. In Jerusalem, there were synagogues which particularly served the Greek-speaking population. The apostles have been primarily preaching at the Temple. Apparently, Stephen has expanded the reach of Jesus’ message by bringing it to these Greek-speaking synagogues as well. The leaders in these synagogues react much the same as the high priests did to the apostles, and in fact the two groups end up banding together against Jesus’ followers here.
 - ‘persuaded some men to lie about Stephen’—these lies are very similar to the ones spoken about Jesus during his mock trial. They have to resort to lies because there is no real legitimate case against him.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* What starts as a complaint on the part of the Greek-speakers quickly becomes a mission. Have you recently noticed a gap in the life of our community that really bothers you? Perhaps it’s a sign of a call from God on your life. Would you be willing to devote yourself to meeting this need? Ask God if God would have you step forward. Also, ask that God would give you the wisdom and the filling of the Holy Spirit necessary to lead in this area. If you feel that God is encouraging you to do so, consider approaching one of your leaders with your idea. In the example of the Greek-speakers in

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this passage, what could have been a source of division became a place of partnership in the expansion of God's kingdom. Ask the Holy Spirit for the same harmony among us in the area of your concern.

- *Through your five:* The apostles asked Stephen to oversee the distribution of food, but he quickly became a powerful preacher as well. Sometimes, as people step forward into whatever necessary tasks at hand, God takes it as an opportunity to unleash new gifts and passions. Are there things you are doing to love or serve the people around you, in which you could invite the help of your five? Some way of being a good neighbor to your neighborhood or the church's neighborhood, perhaps? A small group outreach you're a part of that you think they might enjoy too? Invite them into partnership with you, and ask God to use it as an opportunity to call out new spiritual gifts and passions in them.
- *Through our church:* In this passage, there was a fault in the life of the community that was keeping back the spread of Jesus' message. Ask God to reveal any blind spots in our church that likewise keep us back from spreading good news about Jesus. Pray that God would give us the grace to respond well to what is revealed. Particularly pray that God would give us an eye to the needs of people with fewer resources than us, and wisdom about how to meet those needs.

Wednesday, March 15th

Read [Acts 7:1-8:1](#).

Points of Interest:

- 'our ancestor Abraham'—the witnesses have accused Stephen of being the creator of a new faith which directly contradicts their traditions. Stephen here stresses his common ancestry with his accusers and the Council. Stephen doesn't tell the story of the patriarchs in order to teach them something that they don't know, but rather to demonstrate to them that his message comes out of the exact same histories and traditions that they know so well.
- 'Moses was born--a beautiful child in God's eyes'—Stephen has particularly been accused of teaching contrary to Moses. In response to this false claim, Stephen bases almost his entire sermon on Moses. The story of the patriarchs comes from the writings of Moses, and then the life and ministry of Moses himself serve as the centerpiece of the sermon. Stephen wants to make very clear that he is following Moses' teaching, not rejecting it.
- 'God will raise up a Prophet like me from among your own people'—How can preaching about Jesus be against Moses if Moses himself predicted the coming of just such a Prophet?

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- ‘our ancestors rejected Moses’—Stephen here goes on to point out that the history of the people of Israel is in many ways a long series of rejections of the leaders God sends to them. Stephen essentially turns the charge against him on its head. The accusers have been saying that he has gone against tradition by rejecting Moses; he says it is more likely true that he is going against tradition by accepting Moses’ teaching. This point would probably be hard for the Council to argue with, but infuriating to hear.
- ‘asked for the privilege of building a permanent Temple’—the other charge against Stephen is that he is speaking against the Temple. Whereas he strongly defends himself against the accusation that he is speaking against Moses, he seems to admit that he is speaking against the Temple; but then he goes on to defend his attitude toward the Temple. The Temple, he says, was David’s idea, not God’s. God basically had the same attitude toward the Temple that a parent has toward a house their child builds out of LEGO blocks: God enjoyed the love and the creativity that the Temple expressed, but it’s not as if God could actually live there. But the people of Israel made this children’s art project into the centerpiece of their relationship, and indeed of God’s activity on earth. Meanwhile, while elevating the importance of the Temple, they reject any words from God about the Messiah and eventually kill the Messiah himself. They make too big a deal about the Temple, and they completely ignore what God really cares about—the Messiah. In short, Stephen says that the people have made an idol of the Temple and chosen to worship it rather than Jesus. The Sadducees go into a rage because the Temple is not only their most sacred object, but it is the center of their power.
- ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand!’—while he is in an earthly courtroom, Stephen is also given a glimpse of the heavenly courtroom. Apparently, while the Council is judging Stephen, Jesus is judging the Council. At the same time as the Council is condemning Stephen to death, Stephen is asking Jesus for leniency on them.
- ‘Lord, don’t charge them with this sin’—Stephen’s final words, committing his soul to Jesus and asking for mercy on his killers, echo Jesus’ own final words. He is following in Jesus’ footsteps, in death as in life.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Stephen could clearly see the things in his heritage that helped him to pursue God and the things that inhibited him from pursuing him. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you the same insight into your family, and an ability to embrace what is helpful and turn away from what is unhelpful.
- *Through your five:* Moses had a passion for justice for his people. When he responded to that passion in his own strength, the results were disastrous. But God gave him a second chance, a chance to live out the same passion with God’s power following God’s plan. In this way, Moses was able to do far more for his people than he ever could have

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imagined. What godly passions do your five have? Ask God to give them the chance to follow those passions with supernatural help.

- *Through our church:* David's idea of a building a Temple was intended to be an act of worship of God, but in the end their offering to God became an idol instead. Pray that God would preserve us from turning what we do and how we do it into things we worship over and above God.

Thursday, March 16th

Read [Acts 8:2-40](#).

Points of Interest:

- 'believers who had fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching'—the believers in Jerusalem scatter to places that aren't under the direct authority of the Jerusalem Council. Rather than stopping the news about Jesus, this persecution actually spreads it. The believers don't let the experience of persecution in Jerusalem stop them from doing what Jesus had told them to do: go and tell my message. In fact, up until this point, Luke talks mostly of the apostles (and Stephen) doing the preaching—now all of the scattered believers are becoming preachers.
- ⁵Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria'—here is the second of the seven Greek-speakers who has branched out from food distribution to preaching and teaching.
- 'to the city of Samaria'—the Samaritans and the Jews had, during the time of David and Solomon (about 1000 years before), been one nation, and they were all descended from the same ancestor. When they split into two nations, the Samaritans had mixed more with the surrounding people, taking on their gods and their religious practices. Later, they'd been forcibly mixed with other nations by the Assyrians, who had conquered them. Thus, at least as far as the Jews were concerned, the Samaritans were, both religiously and ethnically, long-lost, renegade Jews. The Samaritans and the Jews shared a common heritage and many common beliefs, but they disliked one another and fought bitterly with one another as only feuding relatives can.
- ¹⁶The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them'—being filled with the Holy Spirit is not something automatic. It is a separate event from deciding to follow Jesus. It is available to everyone, but that does not mean that everyone experiences it. It is not exactly clear why Philip does not himself baptize the Samaritans with the Holy Spirit. Perhaps he lacks the ability. Perhaps he simply doesn't think of it—he is, after all, new to being a preacher. Or perhaps he feels as if he would like the authorization of the apostles before he goes further. This is a big step for the church—for the first time since Jesus' commission to his followers, a mass movement of believers has begun among non-Jews.

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- ‘May your money perish with you’—these are hard words from Peter, but not necessarily an ultimate condemnation of Simon. At one point, Jesus rebukes Peter equally harshly, calling him ‘Satan’ (Mark 8:33). So, Peter knows that such rebukes can lead to repentance and redemption. Perhaps he offers Simon such a stern warning because he sees him at a crucial crossroads between doing things God’s way and doing things in a human way. He is hoping to intervene in Simon’s life at that moment the way Jesus did in his. The fact that Simon is offering money for the Holy Spirit shows that he doesn’t really understand what the Holy Spirit is for. The Holy Spirit is for everyone, for the sake of offering them connection with God and power to share Jesus’ story; but Simon is looking at it as a special gift that will bring him power. Indeed, power seems to be a very important thing for Simon. Before Philip comes around, he is the most powerful person in town; in fact, his nickname is, ‘The Power of God.’ He uses his magic abilities to get prestige and influence for himself. Then, Philip, operating in the power of the Holy Spirit, outdoes Simon. Everyone, including Simon, is persuaded by Philip’s greater ability and begins to follow him instead. But the arrival of the apostles opens up a new opportunity. Apparently, the apostles have access to a power which Philip doesn’t. Maybe Simon thinks that if he gets that power from the apostles, he will be the top man in town again.
- ‘down the desert road’—Philip is in the middle of an amazing new movement in a large and influential city. It must be difficult for Philip to believe that it would be better for him to leave it and go to a road in the middle of the desert instead. But when he hears God’s voice, he obeys.
- ‘the treasurer of Ethiopia’—in popular thinking among the Jews of the time, Ethiopia was considered the end of the earth—it was the last major civilization they were aware of in a southern direction. Jesus calls his followers to tell his story in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Up until now, the apostles have brought the message to Jerusalem and Judea. In this passage, Philip, prompted by Saul’s persecution, carries it to Samaria and to this Ethiopian who will bring it to the ‘ends of the earth.’ The reach of Jesus’ message continues to grow. Of course, Jesus’ mission has not been fulfilled because Philip shares Jesus’ story with one Ethiopian; Jesus really wants the whole world to hear his story. But, this is a foretaste of what Jesus has in mind. In fact, it is the second such foretaste. The first happened at Pentecost, during which Jesus’ story was told in the languages of Jews from all over the world. Now, through Philip’s work, it is actually spreading beyond the Jews and beyond Jerusalem.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* The Holy Spirit puts Philip in the right place at the right time to tell Jesus’ story to someone who is ready and eager to hear it. Ask the Holy Spirit to put you in the path of people like the Ethiopian eunuch. Of course, it took Philip doing a few odd things before he got to the right place: he had to leave a thriving ministry and go to a desert

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- road, run alongside a chariot, and ask the passenger what he was reading. Be prepared to follow the Holy Spirit's instructions, even if they seem a little silly.
- *Through your five:* So far in Acts, Peter has had to severely correct fellow believers twice. Both times, money was a big part of the problem: Ananias and Sapphira try to keep back some of the money they say they are giving to the community; and Simon tries to buy the Holy Spirit. Money seems to have a powerful ability to keep people from the life God has for them. Pray for your five, that money would not have a hold over them.
 - *Through our church:* The Holy Spirit puts Philip into contact with the Ethiopian official, a person with a unique ability to bring news of God's goodness and how to experience it to a new culture and a new socioeconomic class. Ask God to put our church in contact with potential bridge people like this Ethiopian official, in our neighborhood and in our city.

Friday, March 17st

Read [Acts 9:1-19](#).

Points of Interest:

- 'to the synagogues in Damascus'—Saul is no longer content to persecute the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. He asks for permission to follow the people who had dispersed to neighboring regions.
- 'Why are you persecuting me?'—Rather than striking Saul dead or commanding him to stop, Jesus asks a question. And it's a great one. Why exactly is Saul so passionately and violently angry against Jesus' followers? It is significant to note that Jesus considers attacks against his people as a personal attack against him. Saul here encounters the startling truth of Gamaliel's warning: 'You may even find yourselves fighting against God.' Saul has been fighting against God, and now God fights back. Ironically, Saul is a pupil of Gamaliel; Gamaliel's own student most vigorously ignores his advice and discovers the truth of his warning.
- 'he found that he was blind'—Saul's spiritual blindness, his inability to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, is now matched by physical blindness. Both the physical and the spiritual blindness fall away when Saul is able to hear the message of Jesus from one of the people he has been so violently trying to prevent from speaking.
- 'But Lord'—Ananias seems to wonder whether God knows exactly who this Paul is. Ananias may very well have moved to Damascus to avoid Paul's persecution, and now God is asking him to seek him out voluntarily—and to heal him! Ananias may be worried for himself or surprised by the lengths of God's mercy. But either way, he wants to make

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sure that God is sure this is the thing to do. To his great credit, after this small initial protest, Ananias listens to God and obeys what God says.

- ‘Saul is my chosen instrument’—God has big plans even for Saul, this great persecutor of the believers. Peter said to the crowd at Pentecost, who had taken part in killing Jesus, ‘The promise is for you.’ And the same applies to Saul. The promise of the Holy Spirit is for him. In fact, God has prepared a very special role for him.
- ‘I will show him how much he must suffer for me’—Saul will experience the same sort of suffering that he inflicted on others.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Jesus considers persecution of his people as persecution of him. Are there ways you are experiencing suffering or persecution because you are following Jesus? Ask him to be with you and to protect you in the midst of that suffering.
- *Through your five:* Are there ways any of your five are currently actively fighting against Jesus, his people, or his purposes? Ask Jesus to have mercy on them just as he did on Saul. Ask him to turn them away from this fight, and to give them a special purpose for him instead.
- *Through our church:* Ask God to make us a church characterized by trusting in God’s guidance. Ask God to allow us to play a part in calling people into the special purposes God has for them.

Saturday, March 18th

Read [Acts 9:20-31](#).

Points of Interest:

- ‘the Jewish leaders decided to kill him’—these are the same Jewish leaders Saul hoped to convince to join him in persecuting Jesus’ followers. He has indeed provoked them into persecuting the believers, but by his powerful arguments on Jesus’ behalf. These leaders respond to Saul very much how Saul responded to Stephen. Jesus’ prediction that Saul would suffer for his sake doesn’t take long to begin to come true.
- ‘some of the other believers let him down in a large basket’—they are now helping Saul, whose persecution they were escaping, to escape persecution.
- ‘constantly with them in Jerusalem, preaching boldly’—what an amazing reversal! Saul, who drove all but the apostles out of Jerusalem, is now preaching alongside of them.
- ‘sent him on to his hometown’—Saul has been on a rollercoaster ride, going from persecutor to preacher, receiving death threats, seeing friends become enemies and enemies become friends. Perhaps the apostles send him home so that he can rest a little and so that they can all gain their bearings.

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- ‘the church then had peace’—Saul’s turnaround at least temporarily takes the steam out of the persecution of the church.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* In what ways were you an enemy of Jesus’ message in the past? Saul ends up being a proclaimer of Jesus in the very places he was a persecutor. Is there a group of friends, a social group, or some sort of organization in which you were a voice against Jesus? Ask him if he would like you to speak of him in those very same places, and ask him for the opportunities to do it.
- *Through your five:* Saul needed a sponsor into the community of believers. Without Barnabas’ recommendation, the Jerusalem church wouldn’t have known whether or not to accept him, and they wouldn’t have known of his gifts in preaching. Certainly, none of your five are in precisely the same position as Saul. Nonetheless, they may be helped by someone who is willing to introduce them to our community. Are there ways that you can prepare the way for your five to find their place in our community? Perhaps it is just by introducing them to people you know, or mentioning some of their gifts or passions to people with whom they could partner.
- *Through our church:* In this passage, the church grew in both strength and numbers. Pray that God would be doing the same for our church: that God would pull us together as a community, make us into better reflections of Jesus, and bring more people into our midst.

Sunday, March 19th

Read [Acts 9:32-43](#).

Points of Interest:

- ‘traveled from place to place to visit the believers’—the apostles now have groups spread throughout the Middle East that need teaching, training, and encouragement. It seems that while the apostles remain based in Jerusalem, they increasingly go on tours, like this one and the one to Samaria earlier, to encourage the work that is going on in other places.
- ‘they heard that Peter was nearby’—these people have a lot of faith. Even though the woman is dead, they still believe it might be worthwhile to ask Peter if there is anything he can do.
- ‘Peter asked them all to leave the room’—Perhaps all of the noise of the mourning is distracting. Peter could also simply be following Jesus’ example. Jesus also made everyone leave the room before he raised someone from the dead (Mark 5:40). Peter was one of only a few witnesses of that miracle.

Taking it home:

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- *Through you:* Again in this passage, we see the power of miraculous healings to bring joy to people's lives and to draw them to Jesus. Ask Jesus to give you the ability to cure the sick. If you have already seen him work in this way through you, ask for more consistency and for the ability to heal more serious illnesses.
- *For your five:* Tabitha had a tremendous impact on the people around her by acts of kindness, particularly to the poor. Ask the Lord to bless your five with overflowing kindness.
- *For our church:* Peter has become known as someone with the power to bring healing, and by the end of this passage his reputation (by the power of Jesus) has increased all the more. Ask God to make us a church where the sick, whether physically or emotionally, find healing. Ask that we would become such a place of healing that people would know to seek us out when they have a need.