

Thomas, the Hesitant Believer

Devotional Reading: Psalm 91:1–6

Background Scripture: John 11:14–16; 14:5–8; 20:24–29; 21:1–2

John 11:14–16

¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

John 14:5–8

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸ Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

John 20:24–29

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”

²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

²⁸ Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

John 21:1–2

¹ Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.

Key Text

Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” —John 20:27

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 3: Faithful Witnesses Spread the Good News

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify Thomas's development as an observer of Jesus' life and ministry.
2. Explain why the Gospel of John might emphasize Thomas's refusal to believe without seeing Jesus for himself.
3. Make a plan to share their doubts with fellow believers who can provide encouragement in faith.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. From Doubt to Faith
- B. Lesson Context

I. Physical Death (John 11:14–16)

- A. Bound to See Lazarus (vv. 14–15)
- B. Bold Suggestion (v. 16)

II. Heavenly Realities (John 14:5–8)

- A. Confused Questioner (v. 5)
Confident Navigation
- B. Way to the Father (vv. 6–7)
- C. Imprudent Request (v. 8)

III. Resurrection Appearances (John 20:24–29)

- A. Thomas's Stipulation (vv. 24–25)
- B. Visit and Invitation (vv. 26–27)
Wide-Eyed Wonder and Evidence
- C. Belief and Response (vv. 28–29)

IV. At the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1–2)

- A. Important Appearance (v. 1)
- B. Important Audience (v. 2)

Conclusion

- A. Faith Beyond Doubt
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. From Doubt to Faith

"I am an atheist," he said. His wife and children attended our church, but this was his first Sunday. He made it clear he was only there to support his family—he didn't believe in God.

Several months passed, and he reached out again, asking for a meeting. He asked profound and sincere questions about the evidence for Jesus Christ's bodily resurrection. Something was stirring within him. Our discussion was open, honest, and thoughtful. A few weeks later, he chose Jesus as his personal Savior and was baptized.

Skepticism, doubt, and questions characterize some journeys toward faith. Today's lesson highlights one disciple's willingness to ask questions and seek evidence toward sincere belief.

B. Lesson Context

Tradition has labeled Thomas as a pessimist and skeptic. The Gospel of John refers to Thomas as "Didymus" three times (John 11:16; 20:24; 21:2). All these texts are under consideration in today's lesson. Scholars have commented on this designation, which literally means "twin," as meaning "double," like "double-minded." This interpretation has led to the conceptualization of Thomas as a doubter.

The reputation is not entirely fair, however, as it presupposes that Thomas's questions and requests for evidence were extreme or his disbelief was unwarranted. The disciples had no idea that Jesus would return to life. Thomas's desire for proof did not make him a "typical skeptic" because he alone, among the other disciples, had yet to see Jesus.

I. Physical Death

(John 11:14–16)

The setting for our first segment of text is in the vicinity of the village of "Bethany on the other side of the Jordan" (John 1:28; 10:40). This village is not to be confused with the Bethany that is about two miles east of Jerusalem in Judea. The latter was a frequent stop for Jesus and his disciples (Matthew 26:6; Mark 11:1; 14:3; Luke 19:29; 24:50;

John 11:1; 12:1–8). For today’s text, however, Jesus heads to the other Bethany, the one on the east side of the Jordan River. This village is where Jesus fled after attempts on his life during the feast of dedication in Jerusalem (10:22, 31–39).

While teaching in or near Bethany beyond the Jordan and establishing many believers (John 10:41–42), Jesus receives word that a friend named Lazarus is ill (11:1–3). Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, live in the Bethany near Jerusalem. They have a close relationship with Jesus, hosting him in their home and learning from him (Luke 10:38–42). John tells us that Jesus “loved” them (John 11:5).

When Lazarus falls ill, his sisters immediately send word to Jesus (John 11:3). Over the objections of his disciples, Jesus intends to go back to visit them (11:7–9). But he intentionally delays his journey by two days (11:6). During this delay, Lazarus’s illness progresses and ultimately leads to his death. Jesus discerns Lazarus’s passing and informs his disciples it is time to take a trip to visit their friends (11:7, 11). He uses a figure of speech to describe Lazarus’s fate: “our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep” (11:11). But the disciples misinterpret this to mean natural sleep (11:12–13). Jesus now corrects the misunderstanding (compare Acts 7:60; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20).

What Do You Think?

How does the setting of a story impact your understanding of the narrative?

Digging Deeper

What tools can you use to increase your awareness of setting (or context) as you study Scripture?

A. Bound to See Lazarus (vv. 14–15)

14. So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead,

Throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry, his disciples have trouble with his use of figurative language (examples: Matthew 13:34; Mark 8:14–21; compare John 16:25–30). In response to the disciples’ misunderstanding, Jesus now speaks without figurative language: their friend *Lazarus is dead*.

Jesus has divine knowledge of the situation. He demonstrates his omniscience (complete and infinite awareness), which emphasizes his deity. Jesus’ deity is a central theme of John’s Gospel (compare John 1:47–48; 2:24–25; 4:16–19, 29).

What Do You Think?

What is the definition of “figurative language”?

Digging Deeper

How does the use of figurative language enhance the messages of Matthew 5:13–16; 7:3–5; 10:16; John 10:7–10; and 15:1–4?

15. “And for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

Jesus begins an explanation for why he has not departed for Bethany sooner. That explanation focuses on the need for the disciples to *believe*. Jesus understands that Lazarus’s death will serve a divine purpose. Even to this point in the Gospel accounts, lack of belief lingers among Jesus’ followers. This problem must be—and will be—addressed. By waiting until Lazarus has died, Jesus positions himself to do so.

Jesus transitions away from the disciples’ concerns and move the conversation forward. He invites his disciples to accompany him back to Bethany.

What Do You Think?

Have you ever been “glad” something difficult happened for the sake of someone’s learning or development?

Digging Deeper

In what ways might you allow the Holy Spirit to readjust your perspective on life’s disappointments, difficulties, and challenges?

B. Bold Suggestion (v. 16)

16. Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Typically, Peter is the outspoken disciple (Matthew 16:15–16; Luke 12:41; John 6:68–69; 13:6), but this time it is *Thomas* who speaks up. The verse gives him a second name: *Didymus*, which means “twin” (see Lesson Context). There are four listings of the original 12 apostles in the New Testament (Matthew 10:2–4; Mark 3:16–19; Luke 6:13–16; Acts 1:13). The placing of Thomas in the ordering of the four listings is seventh, eighth, eighth, and sixth, respectively.

The disciples are hesitant to make the trip because the Jews in Judea had already tried to stone Jesus (John 10:31–33; 11:8). Seeing that Jesus is determined to return despite the danger, Thomas makes the bold statement we see here—not to Jesus but to Thomas’s fellow *disciples*. Perhaps this emboldens Peter to declare similarly in Matthew 26:33.

II. Heavenly Realities

(John 14:5–8)

We jump to the next time Thomas is featured by name. Jesus is in his final week. On his last observance of the Passover, Jesus washes his disciples’ feet (John 13:1–17). He also predicts his betrayal (13:18–30) and Peter’s denial (13:31–38). The disciples become distressed and confused (13:22), so Jesus begins to teach again, comforting them (14:1). Jesus says that he is going “to prepare a place” for them (14:2). His words regarding both a destination and a way to get there prompt a question from Thomas (14:4).

A. Confused Questioner (v. 5)

5. Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

The question from *Thomas* asks about both the destination (*where are you going*) and the way to get there (*so how can we know?*). Thomas is likely thinking of specific, earthly directions—something concrete, like an address. His response reveals desire: Thomas wants to go where Jesus is going, but he doesn’t feel like he has enough information. Jesus speaks of a spiritual and heavenly reality, while Thomas contemplates a physical location.

We don’t know the tone behind Thomas’s reaction, but we know it is honest. Thomas is open with Jesus—he admits, “I don’t get it!”—and that opens the door to Jesus’ utterance of one of the most well-known passages of Scripture ever spoken, written, and quoted (next verse).

This interaction is not the first time the disciples show their lack of understanding or ask for further clarification, and it won’t be the last. They ask Jesus to explain after he tells the parable of the sower (Mark 4:10–13). Another time, they mistake his reference to the leaven of the Pharisees as literal bread (Matthew 16:5–12). Even after his resurrection, the disciples struggle to comprehend. Jesus has to teach them extensively and open their eyes before they recognize him and can decipher the Scriptures (Luke 24:25–32).

Even Jesus’ parents had a hard time comprehending who he is and what he was doing. Recall the story of twelve-year-old Jesus left behind in Jerusalem. After recovering him in the temple courts, his parents voice their anxiety, and Jesus is incredulous. He asks them, “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49), but they frankly do not understand (2:50).

Confident Navigation

When I was about ten years old, my mom drove me to my grandmother’s house for a visit. On the way, I noticed how many turns and stops we had to make to get there. The trip was about 45 minutes long, and to my little mind, it seemed impossible to remember all the directions. How did my mom do it?

Overwhelmed, I suddenly burst into tears. When my mom asked me what was wrong, I said I never wanted to get my driver’s license. I confessed that I was afraid I’d never be able to go anywhere without getting hopelessly lost. My mom reassured me that my orientation would come with time and practice, and I am happy to report that I eventually got my license!

Thomas reminds me of ten-year-old me. He asks Jesus how they could possibly know where he was going. Perhaps Thomas felt overwhelmed at the magnitude of it all. Riding along in the car as a passenger is one thing. Taking control as

the driver is quite another! How do you handle spiritual navigation and ensure you're following Jesus? —N. M. H.

B. Way to the Father (vv. 6–7)

6a. Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life.

Regarding Thomas's query about life's destination and how to get there, Jesus begins with the latter: Jesus himself is *the way*. This is one of seven statements in the Gospel of John that begin “I am the . . .” as self-identifiers for Jesus (the other six are John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 15:1). Each unveils a unique facet of Jesus' identity as they firmly declare his divinity. The particular “I am the” statement now before us reveals Jesus himself as the guide and pathway. He is the road that leads to an eternal life that is reconciled with God (compare Romans 5:10–11; 2 Corinthians 5:18–19; Colossians 1:19–22; Ephesians 2:13–16).

6b. “No one comes to the Father except through me.

Now Jesus switches from discussing how to get to the destination to specifying it. The destination is nothing less than admittance into the presence of the heavenly *Father*. Before Thomas's query, Jesus spoke of the nature of that presence in terms of the “Father's house” (John 14:2–3). Jesus promises that he will be there with his disciples (14:4).

Jesus is one with the Father, sees him clearly, and descended from heaven to earth according to his will (John 1:18; 3:13; 10:30). To properly approach the Father is to come by way of Jesus.

What Do You Think?

What does Jesus mean when he calls himself “the way”? How is he “the life”? “the truth”?

Digging Deeper

How do the seven “I am the . . .” statements of Christ enhance your understanding of Jesus and his role (John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1)?

7. “If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

There is a unity between the Father and Son that is difficult to put into words. But when a believer knows one, that believer knows something of the other. In fact, knowledge of the Father is conditional on knowing Jesus. This is a challenge to the disciples: Do they really know the Son? The answer to that question comes next.

What Do You Think?

What caused the disciples to miss seeing the Father in Jesus?

Digging Deeper

How does Matthew 25:35–40 deepen your conceptualization of “seeing” God?

C. Imprudent Request (v. 8)

8. Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

This reaction reveals that the disciples continue to struggle to understand Jesus' teaching. *Philip* voices their lack of understanding this time by asking Jesus to *show* them the *Father*. His request reveals a continuing misunderstanding regarding the connection between Jesus and the Father.

III. Resurrection Appearances

(John 20:24–29)

Jesus appeared personally and in the flesh to several people on the day of his resurrection (Matthew 28:1–10; John 20:1–23; etc.). Even so, doubts lingered and would continue to linger over the weeks ahead (Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:38). The most articulate of these comes from the apostle Thomas.

A. Thomas's Stipulation (vv. 24–25)

24–25a. Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

The phrase *when Jesus came* refers to his appearance in John 20:19–23. It's easy to imagine that the declaration *We have seen the Lord!* is the very first thing spoken to Thomas when he rejoins the group.

25b. But he said to them, “Unless I see the



Visual for Lesson 9. *Point to the visual and ask, "What doubts or questions of faith do you have? How might other believers encourage you?"*

nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

This is where the derogatory phrase "doubting Thomas" originates. Eyewitness accounts of his fellow disciples are not good enough for Thomas. He declares his need for physical, tangible evidence (compare John 4:48). Belief in disembodied spirits was common in the ancient world, and Thomas wants firsthand proof that the claim of Jesus' resurrection is more than a ghost story. Only then will Thomas believe that the person the disciples saw is the same Jesus who was crucified, died, was buried, and has risen.

B. Visit and Invitation (vv. 26–27)

26. A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"

Waiting a *week*, Jesus is in no hurry to prove himself to *Thomas*. We can only imagine the discussions and arguments between Thomas and the other *disciples* during that interim! When the right time does come, the circumstances are almost identical to those of the previous appearance of Jesus (compare John 20:19).

27. Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Jesus, who is very well aware of Thomas's doubt, addresses him directly with the invitation we see here. Worthy of note is the fact that Jesus' invitation exactly mirrors Thomas's stated demand to personally examine Jesus' *hands* and *side* (John 20:25b, above; compare 19:34).

Wide-Eyed Wonder and Evidence

I once heard a child psychologist say that when young children ask *why*, they aren't always looking for a direct answer. Sometimes, they are simply trying to express their wide-eyed wonder. A child might ask, "Why does the moon shine so brightly?" But they may be trying to express something more like, "Wow! What a miraculous thing the moon is! Look how it lights up the night sky!"

A scientific response can diminish the wonder and awe of the moment. A better response might be something like, "I know! Isn't it amazing?"

Thomas often gets a bad rap for disbelieving eyewitness testimony from reliable sources that Jesus rose from the dead. But perhaps he was also expressing wide-eyed wonder and amazement at the miracle. Imagine trying to wrap your mind around the news of someone coming back to life! Here's a good evangelistic tool to use sometime: ask an unbeliever, "What kind of evidence would you need to believe Jesus arose from the dead?" —N. M. H.

C. Belief and Response (vv. 28–29)

28. Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

John does not specify whether Thomas reaches out and touches Jesus' physical body. Instead, the text suggests that Thomas believes without touching Jesus' side. He responds to Jesus with a personal confession of faith in his *Lord* and *God*.

Thomas thus pulls together everything Jesus taught about himself in this complete recognition: Jesus embodies the very essence of God the Father, in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells (John 10:30; Colossians 1:15–19; 2:9; Hebrews 1:3).

29. Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Bible scholars are divided on whether Jesus' response is a reprimand. On the one hand, those

who view it as a rebuke argue that Thomas should have believed on the basis of the eyewitness testimony of the other disciples. On the other hand, the other disciples themselves did not believe until they encountered the risen Christ and saw him personally (Mark 16:9–11; Luke 24:10–11).

The critical point is that Jesus speaks a message for an audience beyond Thomas—the message reaches toward future generations, toward us today. There is blessing in believing without having firsthand knowledge (compare John 20:31).

IV. At the Sea of Galilee

(John 21:1–2)

In the intervening verses of John 20:30–31, the Gospel writer stresses two things. First, the examples he records are but a sample of “many other signs” that the disciples witnessed from Jesus. Second, the instances John chose are written so that the reader will believe in Jesus. These two verses also serve as a transition into the episode that follows.

A. Important Appearance (v. 1)

1. Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way:

Here we catch one more glimpse of the risen Christ with his *disciples*. They convene at the *Sea of Galilee*, which is also referred to by others names like the Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1; compare Luke 5:1). Jesus’ appearance here is in line with Matthew 26:32; 28:7; Mark 14:28; 16:7.

B. Important Audience (v. 2)

2. Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.

Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances number about a dozen, depending on how textual overlaps are counted. Collective witness increases the credibility of the testimony (compare 1 Corinthians 15:6). In this particular appearance, John notes the presence of seven disciples, with Thomas named second (compare the four listings of the

apostles noted on John 11:16, above). Thomas is poised to observe another miracle (John 21:6) and Peter’s restoration (21:15–19).

Conclusion

A. Faith Beyond Doubt

Thomas’s doubt mirrors a common human experience: the struggle of faith, which asks us to trust evidence that we ourselves cannot see firsthand. Jesus often taught in parables, his words falling on his hearers’ ears like riddles. And his resurrection is a fantastic miracle! Thomas’s interactions with Jesus show humans’ difficulty with stepping outside the physical world and into a more important spiritual reality. The way toward deep comprehension of Jesus as the Son of God, Messiah, and Lord is challenging. Understanding Jesus as fully God, one with the Father, is difficult too. It takes questioning and wrestling to overcome the doubts and puzzles that inevitably emerge along the journey of faith. We must have the eyes of our understanding enlightened to truly comprehend (Ephesians 1:18). Sometimes that requires honest questions. It always requires engagement with Jesus, with whom the text of Scripture is primarily concerned.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, open our eyes to see how we are like Thomas in both our strengths and weaknesses. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Jesus meets us in our doubts.

How to Say It

Bethabara	<i>Beth-ab-uh-ruh.</i>
Bethany	<i>Beth-uh-nee.</i>
Cana	<i>Kay-nuh.</i>
Didymus	<i>Did-uh-mus.</i>
Galilee	<i>Gal-uh-lee.</i>
omniscience	<i>ahm-nish-uns.</i>
Pharisees	<i>Fair-ih-seez.</i>
Tiberias	<i>Tie-beer-ee-us.</i>
Zebedee	<i>Zeb-eh-dee.</i>

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

To open class, ask all participants to think of one true thing about themselves that they are willing to share with the whole group. After each person shares, ask them to “prove it.” Require tangible, visible evidence that what they claim is true. (*Hint:* show a photo, ID, scar, etc., but some things might be impossible to prove—and that is alright!)

Option. Follow the instructions on the “Tough Questions (Facilitator Page)” exercise from the activity pages, which you can download.

Lead into Bible study by saying, “We all have doubts and questions—some are inconsequential curiosities, but others have real significance to our faith and worldview. In today’s lesson, notice the main character’s questions and doubts. Consider the ways you relate to him.”

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read John 11:14–16 out loud. Divide participants into two groups: **Jesus** and **Disciples**. Instruct both groups to read John 11:1–15. Ask the **Jesus Group** to write down exactly what Jesus said in verses 4, 7, 11, and 14–15. Have them write what he meant beside each statement. Ask the **Disciples Group** to write down exactly what Jesus said in verses 4, 7, 11, and 14–15. Then have them write what Thomas and the other disciples may have *thought* Jesus meant beside each statement. Bring the class back together and invite the groups to share their findings, alternating answers to highlight the differences. Ask: “Why do you think it was so confusing and difficult for Thomas to understand Jesus in this account?” Allow time for voluntary responses.

Ask a volunteer to read John 14:5–8. Divide participants into small groups of four and provide them with blank white copy paper, one full piece of colored construction paper with a ½ inch diameter circle cut out of the middle and labeled “The Way,” and pencils. Instruct groups to draw

a map on the white copy paper; the map should lead from the current room they are in to anywhere they choose on the surrounding property. Then ask groups to overlay the construction paper on their map, with the hole placed over the current room. Have groups trade their maps with the construction paper in place. Ask groups to follow the other group’s map by moving the cover inch by inch along the route until they reach the end destination. Ask groups to discuss: “How did you feel, knowing a path existed but not being able to see it or know where it was leading?”

Ask a volunteer to read John 20:24–29 out loud. Then ask two volunteers to act out the roles of Thomas and Jesus in this scene (all other participants can be the “other disciples”). Ask participants to share what part of this story is most significant to them and why.

Ask a volunteer to read John 21:1–2. Have small groups imagine a conversation between the seven disciples in this scene. Challenge them to write down at least one line that each disciple might have said. Ask: “How is Thomas’s presence among this group meaningful to you?”

Alternative. Ask participants to pair up with a partner. Distribute the “Thomas’s Journey” exercise from the activity page. Ask pairs to complete the activity as indicated.

Into Life

Distribute index cards and pens. Ask students to divide into pairs. Give them one minute to write down one question or doubt they have in faith. Then say, “Questions and doubts are inevitable from time to time. Jesus is gracious with our needs, and he wants us to trust him even when we don’t understand.”

Instruct pairs to work together to make a plan to share their doubts with fellow believers. Ask partners to pray for each other—especially to encourage each other’s faith.

Stephen, the Unwavering Martyr

Devotional Reading: Luke 23:32–43

Background Scripture: Acts 6–7

Acts 6:7–10

⁷ 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.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.



Key Text

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

—Acts 6:8

Acts 7:54–60

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 3: Faithful Witnesses Spread the Good News

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Recount the story of Stephen's courageous witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.
2. Describe the parallels that Acts draws between Stephen and Jesus.
3. Write a way that Stephen's courageous witness may inform their own witness to Jesus Christ.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Handling the Hardships
- B. Lesson Context

I. The Growing Church (Acts 6:7–10)

- A. Disciples and Priests (v. 7)
- B. Power and Wonder (v. 8)
- C. Wisdom and Spirit (vv. 9–10)

II. The Faithful Martyr (Acts 7:54–60)

- A. Furious Reaction (v. 54)
- B. Fervent Realization (vv. 55–56)
The Worst of Times
- C. Fateful Reaction (vv. 57–60)
Punch Back

Conclusion

- A. Opposition and Response
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Handling the Hardships

Max Cleland (1942–2021) led a promising life. In high school, he excelled in sports and received the title of “Most Outstanding Senior.” At the age of 24, he volunteered for combat duty in Vietnam, where he served as a captain in the army.

Just one month before returning home, Cleland picked up a grenade that he thought he had dropped accidentally. He was mistaken, and the resulting explosion mangled or altogether severed his right hand, right leg, and left leg. Though not expected to survive, Cleland recovered from his triple amputation, and he recalled the apostle Paul's teaching that “hope does not put us to shame” (Romans 5:5).

When Cleland returned to civilian life, he entered politics, learned to drive a car specially equipped for him, and traveled extensively to mobilize support for veterans' causes. At age 34 he became the youngest man ever to head the Veterans Administration. Later, he was elected as a US senator from Georgia. Max Cleland summarized his experience: “Life doesn't revolve around an arm and a leg. People look at you the way you look at yourself.”

Today's lesson presents a servant of God who faced a catastrophic blow. It was a blow that led directly to his death. The story of God's servants is stained with the blood of prophets and apostles who paid the price for speaking the truth, and today's lesson presents this reality in vivid detail.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Acts begins the story of the earliest church by focusing on its development within Jerusalem. The theme of “witnesses” in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) is like of a “Table of Contents” for Acts as it sketches the birth of the church. The narrative starts with events on the Day of Pentecost (2:1–41). Predominant in the account is the divine power behind the dynamic Jerusalem fellowship. The church increased in number from only about 120 believers to more than 3,000 in a single day (compare 1:15; 2:41).

The number of believers in Jerusalem continued to increase over the weeks and months after Pentecost (Acts 2:47b; 5:14; 6:1). The expanding number of believers led them to develop habits for their gatherings and expectations for how they would treat each other (2:42–47a; 4:32–35). During that time, almost all followers of Jesus were of Jewish heritage. However, not all had the same cultural upbringing. Some had adopted elements of Greek culture while living in the Greek-speaking (Hellenistic) portions of the Roman Empire (compare 9:29), while others lived in Jewish regions of Palestine. The distinction between Grecian Jews and Hebraic Jews was revealed in a conflict regarding the treatment of widows (6:1).

To resolve conflict, the Twelve selected seven men “full of the Spirit and wisdom” to handle food distribution to the needy. These men included Stephen (Acts 6:3–5).

I. The Growing Church

(Acts 6:7–10)

A. Disciples and Priests (v. 7)

7. 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.

This verse highlights two important aspects of the growth of the first-century church. First, its development is driven by the dramatic *spread of the word of God* (compare Acts 9:31; 12:24; 19:20; 28:31). As the influence of the gospel message increases among people, so does *the number of disciples*. When the gospel falls on willing hearts, spiritual fruit results, often in abundant measures (see Luke 8:8, 15).

Second, the fact that the church’s number *increased rapidly* implies exponential growth. A comparison of the number of believers in the early chapters of Acts highlights this expansion (Acts 1:15; 2:41; 4:4; see also 2:47; 5:14; 6:1; 16:5).

Counted among these believers are numerous *priests*. These men serve in the temple when their lot is chosen (example: Luke 1:5, 8–10). We may find this surprising since chief priests opposed Jesus and his message in conjunction with both Pharisees

(Matthew 21:45; 27:62; John 7:32, 45; 11:47, 57; 18:3) and Sadducees (Acts 4:1–4; 5:17–18, 27–28).

What Do You Think?

What steps can you take to ensure that the Word of God spreads through your family and community?

Digging Deeper

To what extent does the Word of God spread through the Spirit’s work, and to what extent does it spread through human effort?

B. Power and Wonder (v. 8)

8. Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

The display of miracles that accredit Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 2:22) and confirm the message of the apostles (2:43; 5:12) now also certify God’s approval of the ministry of *Stephen*. These signs confirm the presence of God’s grace and the empowerment of his servants (2 Corinthians 12:12).

The book of Acts does not specify the nature of Stephen’s miraculous work *among the people*. His calling before this was to be one of seven men to oversee a first-century version of “Meals on Wheels” (see Acts 6:1–4). We presume that Stephen’s ministry in that regard did not involve miracles. Therefore, the *great wonders and signs* he now performs indicate relief from suffering from both physical and spiritual ailments, as has been true of the apostles (compare 3:1–10; 4:30; 5:15–16). Although he is not one of the apostles, Stephen is chosen by God to bear witness to salvation (compare Hebrews 2:3–

How to Say It

Alexandrians	Al-ex-an-dree-unz.
Cyrenians	Sigh-ree-nee-unz.
Hellenistic	Heh-leh-nihs-tic.
Libertines	Lib-er-teens.
Pentecost	Pent-ih-kost.
Sadducees	Sad-you-seez.
Sanhedrin	San-huh-drun or San-heed-run.

4). As one who is “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5), his life demonstrates the spiritual *power* that Jesus promised (1:8).

What Do You Think?

In what ways can believers develop spiritual power?

Digging Deeper

How can mature believers leverage their spiritual power to encourage the growth of newer believers?

C. Wisdom and Spirit (vv. 9–10)

9. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.

After the exile of 586 BC, the need for synagogues arose among the Jewish people. By the time of the first century AD, synagogues served as important meeting places for observing religious practices, studying Scripture, gathering on the Sabbath, and discussing Jewish law and tradition (examples: Matthew 4:23; Acts 9:20; 13:14–15; 15:21). Additionally, synagogues were places for financial contribution, elementary education, and hospitality.

More than one *synagogue* may be in view here. Commentators suggest the writer could be considering anywhere from one to five synagogues, although most tend to lean toward one or two. Paul refers to multiple synagogues in Jerusalem (Acts 24:11–12). Therefore, the groups mentioned in this verse may attend different synagogues. Nonetheless, they all had a specific dispute with Stephen.

The Freedmen are Jews who have been liberated from slavery or who are descendants of those freed; these differ from freeborn citizens who never experienced enslavement. *Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria* are from what is modern-day North Africa, and *Cilicia* and *Asia* are regions located in what is modern-day Turkey. The mention of these groups heightens anticipation for the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem and its surrounding areas to all nations and peoples (Acts 1:8; 2:5–12).

Acts 6:11–14 indicates that the dispute with Stephen is likely over his interpretation of the Law of Moses and the relevance of the temple. The result is a charge of blasphemy, a charge that Jesus himself faced (Matthew 26:65; Mark 14:64).

10. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

The fact that the synagogue members *could not stand up against* Stephen does not mean that they agreed with his message; rather, it indicates their inability to refute his teachings. Their powerlessness fulfills Jesus’ promise to give his persecuted disciples “words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict” (Luke 21:15). Such fulfillment suggests that Stephen’s wisdom was given to him by Jesus himself, undoubtedly through his Spirit (compare 12:11–12).

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to ensure your speech is filled with wisdom?

Digging Deeper

How do Proverbs 15:1–2; Ephesians 4:29–32; Colossians 4:5–6; and James 1:19; 3:13–18 inform your answer?

II. The Faithful Martyr

(Acts 7:54–60)

The conflict between Stephen and the synagogue members escalates. False accusations lead to Stephen’s arrest and trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:11–15). Stephen, speaking in his defense, emphasizes Israel’s history of rebellion against God. In that regard, Stephen lodges at least four countercharges: the Jewish leaders (1) are “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised” in heart and ears” (7:51); (2) resist the Holy Spirit (7:51); (3) have betrayed and murdered the Messiah and his prophets (7:52); and (4) have not obeyed the Law of Moses (7:53).

A. Furious Reaction (v. 54)

54. When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

The Sanhedrin is the highest Jewish council in Palestine. It was led by the high priest (Acts 5:21,

27; 7:1; 23:2) and was composed of priests, rulers, elders, and teachers of the law, as well as Sadducees and Pharisees (4:5, 23; 5:21, 34; 23:6).

This include everything that Stephen has spoken in his lengthy speech found in Acts 7:2–53, especially the last three of those verses. His words provoke a sharp reaction from the Sanhedrin. They were *furiosus*, full of intense anger or rage (compare Acts 5:33). The phrase *gnashed their teeth* signifies a corresponding behavior or facial expression. We see increasing hostility on their part as we trace their reactions from Acts 4:1–22 to 5:27–42 to 7:54–58. Their anger escalates as the story unfolds.

B. Fervent Realization (vv. 55–56)

55. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Stephen, like Moses, is granted the privilege of witnessing God's *glory* (compare Exodus 33:18–23). To be seated *at the right hand* is considered to be in a place of honor (Psalm 110:1 [quoted in Acts 2:34 and Hebrews 1:13]; Matthew 26:64; Luke 22:69; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3). But we note that Stephen sees *Jesus standing*, not sitting, at that position. At least three interpretations have been proposed. One theory is that it indicates Jesus' transcendence, meaning that he is supernatural and surpasses creaturely boundaries. A second interpretation is that Jesus is rising from his throne to welcome Stephen into heaven. A third interpretation proposes that it signifies his readiness to judge, either in support of Stephen or against the Sanhedrin—or both (compare Isaiah 3:13). Indeed, this imagery may embrace all three ideas.

56. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

A vital turning point occurs. On rare occasions, Scripture mentions *heaven* being opened (compare Ezekiel 1:1; Matthew 3:16; Luke 3:21; John 1:51; Acts 10:11; Revelation 4:1). That is no less the case here when we compare the last line of Acts 7:55 (above) with the last line in the verse now before us.

Stephen replaces the name "Jesus" with the des-

ignation *the Son of Man*. This title was Jesus' favorite self-designation during his earthly ministry. It appears more than 80 times in the Gospels and is associated with Jesus' authority, judgment, and role in salvation (compare Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 12:8; 22:69). This title can be traced to Daniel 7:13–14. Thus Stephen recognizes Jesus as the divine and promised Messiah, something the doubters don't do (compare John 12:34).

Tied to this revelation is the fact that Stephen sees Jesus sharing in God's presence and glory. His acknowledgment of the divinity of Jesus cannot be missed.

Stephen has avoided making direct statements about Christ up to this point. Now Stephen directly associates Christ with God himself, a confession he knows will not help his case before the Sanhedrin. Jesus was previously convicted of blasphemy by this group for making similar associations with God (Matthew 26:64–65; Luke 22:69–71). One can only admire Stephen's courage in the face of deadly opposition.

What Do You Think?

How does this passage expand your understanding of Jesus' role as an advocate for believers?

Digging Deeper

How does Stephen's vision of Christ's authority and transcendence encourage your faithfulness to Christ?

The Worst of Times

One late autumn day, it felt like everything in my life was going wrong. Our family's plans for the future had crumbled, and we found ourselves searching for jobs. We desperately sought any glimpse of the hope we had lost.

I began taking walks through our neighborhood, praying, crying, and asking God to fix our situation. Over time, those walks became sacred to me. As I walked, I realized I was not alone: God's presence was with me. The more I poured my heart out to him in prayer, the more I noticed his peace.

I haven't experienced a day like Stephen did in Acts 7. But when I read his story, I see that God's

presence was with him on his worst day—just as God has been with me time and time again through the most challenging seasons of my life.

On your most difficult days, do you experience the comforting and strengthening presence of God's Spirit? If not, why not? —B. R.

C. Fateful Reaction (vv. 57–60)

57–58a. At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

What started as a trial based on false witnesses (Acts 6:13) ends with deadly mob violence. The Jewish leaders sentenced Jesus to death after their perception of blasphemy (Matthew 26:65–66; compare John 10:31–33). Death by stoning is indeed the proper Old Testament punishment for blasphemy (Leviticus 24:10–16). But the members of the Sanhedrin refuse to consider evidence of Jesus' divinity as they cover *their ears*.

Their *loud* voices drown out Stephen's perceived blasphemies (see Acts 6:11). All pretense of due process is out the window as the Jewish leaders act on their belief that Stephen's conviction means he deserves immediate death. We expect mob action from unruly crowds (Ezekiel 16:40; John 10:22–39) but not from the members of the Sanhedrin!

Ironically, Stephen previously accused these leaders of having “uncircumcised” ears, unwilling to hear the truth (Acts 7:51; compare Jeremiah 6:10). Their actions reflect precisely this unwillingness. If they had circumcised ears and hearts (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Romans 2:29), they would respond with faith and repentance (compare Acts 2:37–41; 4:4).

However, as the Jewish leaders acknowledge in the case of Jesus, Roman law reserved the imposition of capital punishment for itself (John 18:31). Therefore, as the religious leaders rush to execute Stephen, they are simultaneously misapplying the Law of Moses and breaking the Roman legal code.

58b. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

The witnesses are likely the “false witnesses” whose accusations Stephen just addressed (Acts 6:13–14; 7:2–53). Furthermore, their laying

down *their coats* is practical rather than symbolic; it allows them to throw stones more easily and avoid staining their clothes with blood.

The text introduces a new character, a young man named *Saul*. The note that Stephen's executioners place their clothes at Saul's *feet* suggests that he has a position of authority among the Jews (compare Acts 4:35, 37; 5:2). This detail supports the fact that he approves the execution (8:1; 9:1–2; 22:20).

While Stephen's speech likely had little immediate impact on Saul, the arguments about the law and the temple will become foundational to Saul's ministry as he becomes known as Paul (Acts 13:9). He too will be attacked by an angry mob in Jerusalem (21:27) and have to defend himself against charges involving the law and the temple (25:8), not to mention being stoned himself (14:19; compare 2 Corinthians 11:25). Stephen's speech thus will be echoed in ways he does not live to see. Saul's memory of this day will not fade (Acts 22:20).

It is worth noting that there are two references to Saul's age in the New Testament. The designation *young* can indicate an age between 18 and 40, according to the use of that word at that time. At this point, he is young, while in Philemon 9, he is “aged.”

59. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

In prayer, Stephen once again acknowledges Jesus' lordship and divinity. By asking the *Lord* to *receive my spirit*, Stephen affirms the Christian hope of living with Christ after death. Stephen's prayer also echoes the Lord's final words on the cross: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46; compare Psalm 31:5).

60. Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

This element of Stephen's prayer echoes Jesus' prayer on the cross in Luke 23:34 to forgive the executioners. By requesting this, Stephen follows Jesus' teaching to “love your enemies” and “do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27–28). In word and deed, Stephen's steadfast witness exemplifies what it means to follow the crucified and risen Messiah (compare 9:23).

The sobering episode concludes as Stephen falls *asleep*—a metaphor for death (compare 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18). Jesus’ disciples were often confused by his use of figurative language (examples: Mark 7:17–18; 8:14–21; John 11:11–15; 16:25–30). But there’s no mistaking what is happening here.

What Do You Think?

How can we cultivate a heart of forgiveness and love for those who hurt us?

Digging Deeper

What practical steps can you take to show forgiveness to someone who has wronged you, even if they haven’t sought reconciliation?

Punch Back

When I was a little girl, my brother and I would play a game during car rides. We’d look for Volkswagen Beetles, or “punch buggies” as we called them. The first person to spot a punch buggy was allowed to punch the other person in the arm. We often added a disclaimer as we punched: “Punch buggy! No punch backs!” As you might imagine, fists frequently flew in the backseat of my parents’ vehicle, and revenge hits were part of the game. Pretty soon, we weren’t looking for Volkswagens; we were looking for retaliation against each other.

As Stephen faced death, he didn’t cry out for revenge against his killers. He didn’t call others to “punch back” in revenge. Instead, he followed Jesus’ example by asking God to forgive his murderers and offering up his spirit to the Lord.

When was the last time you asked God to forgive your enemies rather than retaliate against them?
—B. R.

Conclusion

A. Opposition and Response

Stephen’s suffering was not in vain. The tragedy of his death led to the spread of the gospel (Acts 8:1–8). His Spirit-filled obedience to Christ empowered him to act selflessly in the face of unfair objection. As a result, Stephen is a model of courage in the face of opposition.



Visual for Lesson 10. Display this visual as you ask the class to list attributes of a faithful witness to Christ Jesus.

Followers of Jesus can expect opposition—possibly even *bitter* opposition—from others. Stephen faced fierce resistance from many of his fellow Jews. Synagogue members argued with him, false witnesses testified against him, and religious leaders responded with murderous rage. The actions taken against Stephen remind us of Jesus’ promises to his disciples: “If [the world] persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20).

When faced with opposition, we can follow Stephen’s example and respond with wisdom, love, and a reliance on God’s Spirit. God’s Spirit and wisdom filled Stephen, which allowed him to present such compelling arguments that no one could effectively counter or refute. And though he rebuked his fellow Jews, he did so out of love and a desire for them to repent and believe in Christ. Indeed, Stephen loved his opponents even to his death, courageously defending the gospel and graciously praying for their forgiveness. The Lord expects nothing less from us today (Luke 6:27–36; 1 Peter 3:15–16).

B. Prayer

Father God, empower us to be courageous witnesses to your Son in our own settings. Enable us to respond to opposition with as much wisdom, love, and dependence on the Spirit as possible. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Respond to opposition as Jesus and Stephen did.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Ask participants to brainstorm the commitments, responsibilities, and preferences that “fill up” their time, energy, and attention. (Possible examples: God, family, work, church, volunteering, sports, etc.) Write responses on the board.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Filled Up” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have participants complete it individually in a minute or less before discussing their conclusions.

Lead into Bible study by saying, “Various commitments, responsibilities, and preferences fill our lives. When we encounter difficult circumstances, the priorities that ‘fill’ us will ‘spill out’ and become evident to those around us. In today’s study, pay attention to how a moment of testing reveals Stephen’s priorities.”

Into the Word

Prior to class, recruit a volunteer to give a three-minute presentation on Stephen’s life and ministry. Encourage the volunteer to read Acts 6:1–8:3 and use online resources for preparation. The presentation should address how Stephen was chosen for ministry, the main points of his speech before the Sanhedrin, and the consequences of his death.

Announce a Bible-marking activity. Provide copies of Acts 6:7–10 and 7:54–60 for those who prefer not to write in their Bibles. Provide handouts (you create) with these instructions:

- Underline any words or phrases that describe Stephen.
- Double underline any words or phrases that describe the actions of Stephen’s opposition.
- Draw a circle around any mention of or allusion to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.
- Draw a question mark around any words or phrases you want to study further.

Slowly read the Scripture aloud (or ask volunteers to do so) at least twice and as many as four

times. As the Scripture is read, class members should mark their copies in the ways noted.

After the final reading, divide the class into pairs to discuss the following questions: 1–What words or phrases describe Stephen? 2–What words or phrases describe the actions of his opposition? 3–Why do you think they “could not stand up against” his wisdom (Acts 6:10)? 4–What words or phrases describe God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit? 5–How did those in power respond to the Spirit’s work in Stephen? 6–What was the impact of the Spirit’s wisdom through Stephen?

Option. Divide participants into three groups and assign each group one of the following Scripture passages: Luke 22:66–70; Luke 23:33–34; and Luke 23:46. Instruct groups to compare their assigned passage to Acts 7:54–60. Ask the following questions for in-group discussion: 1–How are the accounts of Stephen’s execution and Jesus’ crucifixion similar and different? 2–In what ways did Stephen’s understanding of Jesus’ suffering help him endure his own suffering?

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Good News and Bad News” exercise from the activity page. Have participants work in small groups to complete as indicated before discussing responses and conclusions with the whole class.

Into Life

Ask participants to work with a partner to identify aspects of Stephen’s example and witness that can strengthen discipleship to Jesus. Ask, “How can you apply Stephen’s example to your life and relationships?” Encourage pairs to brainstorm at least three examples.

Distribute an index card and pen to each participant and ask them to write down how Stephen’s courageous witness may inspire their own witness to Jesus Christ in the coming week. After a minute of individual reflection, invite volunteers to share their responses.

Saul of Tarsus, the Unlikely Apostle

Devotional Reading: Psalm 86:1–10

Background Scripture: Acts 7:58–8:3; 9:1–31; 22:3–15

Acts 22:3–15

³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

⁸ “‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the

light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

¹⁰ “‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ ¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

¹² “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. ¹³ He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.

¹⁴ “Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. ¹⁵ You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.’ ”

Key Text

“Then [Ananias] said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.’”

—Acts 22:14–15

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 3: Faithful Witnesses Spread the Good News

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Retell Paul's encounter with Jesus and call as Christ's witness.
2. Compare the motivations for Paul's zeal before and after encountering Jesus.
3. Compose his or her own story of meeting Jesus and explain what personal weaknesses God has used for good.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Fire for Good or Fire for Bad?
- B. Lesson Context

I. Recounting the Past (Acts 22:3–5)

- A. Studied the Law (vv. 3)
- B. Persecuted Followers (vv. 4–5)

II. Encountering the Lord (Acts 22:6–11)

- A. Questions and Revelation (vv. 6–10a)
- B. Reply and Command (vv. 10b–11)

Tactical Flashlight

III. Commissioned for the Future (Acts 22:12–15)

- A. Renewed Sight (vv. 12–13)
- B. Chosen Witness (vv. 14–15)

Unlikely Witness

Conclusion

- A. Opened Eyes Open Other Eyes
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Fire for Good or Fire for Bad?

Early in 2024, my small town in the Texas Panhandle was among those affected by a series of wildfires that devastated over 1.2 million acres of land. This was not the first time our town had suffered severe damage from a wildfire. Thankfully, there were no fatalities, but the damage was substantial.

We know all too well the destructive capabilities of fire! It's not surprising, then, that fire is prime imagery for anger, wrath, and destruction. Even so, we continue to use fire in various ways—for warmth, cooking, incineration, and even for controlling other fires.

Our relationship with fire is complicated. We acknowledge it can be both helpful and harmful. So it is with the fiery disposition of *zeal*. It can ignite a passion for good or unleash a destructive force. Ultimately, it all depends on how and for what purpose zeal is used.

B. Lesson Context

In about AD 58, at the end of his third missionary journey, Paul returned to Jerusalem for the final time (Acts 21:17). The centerpiece of that third missionary trip was his lengthy ministry in Ephesus (19:1, 8–10; 20:31), a stay marked by no little controversy. His forebodings and those of others did not indicate that his visit to Jerusalem would be any less controversial—quite the opposite, in fact (20:17–38; 21:4, 10–14). But Paul made the trip anyway.

Upon his arrival, Paul met with leaders of the Jerusalem church and reported on his ministry (Acts 21:17–19). Those leaders also warned Paul of the danger his presence posed (21:20–24). When that danger materialized, Paul was arrested on a false charge of defiling the temple (21:27). Had it not been for the presence of Roman troops to restore order, Paul probably would have been killed right then and there (21:30–36). After being rescued, Paul then surprisingly asked to address the mob that had just tried to kill him. The Roman commander gave permission (21:40–22:2), and that's where our lesson text opens.

I. Recounting the Past

(Acts 22:3–5)

A. Studied the Law (v. 3)

3a. “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel

Paul’s defense of his ministry includes an account of his own incredible transformation. Details of that experience occur three times in the book of Acts: here, in Acts 9:1–19, and in Acts 26:12–23.

He begins by describing his upbringing as a Diaspora *Jew*. The Greek word *diaspora* means “dispersed” or “scattered,” as it is found in John 7:35; James 1:1; and 1 Peter 1:1 (compare Deuteronomy 4:27). Having been born in a Roman province allowed Paul to gain Roman citizenship (compare Acts 22:27–28). *Tarsus*, the capital of *Cilicia*, located in present-day Turkey, is about 360 miles north of Jerusalem. First-century Tarsus was a major trading center that also became the site of many cults. The city was thoroughly Greco-Roman, presenting numerous pressures for someone born a Jew. But Paul strongly implies that he had not been assimilated into that pagan environment, given that he had been *brought up in Jerusalem*.

Paul continues to present his credentials to establish his background as a faithful Jew. A posture of sitting at the feet of a teacher was common for Jewish disciples (example: Luke 10:39). In that light, one could hardly do better than having studied *under Gamaliel*. This man’s wisdom and high regard among the people is seen in Acts 5:34–39.

What Do You Think?

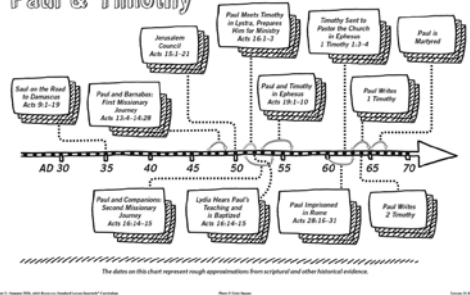
How does your background or life experience shape how you approach your faith today?

Digging Deeper

How has God used these experiences to prepare you for specific opportunities in your faith journey?

3b. “and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.

Chronology of Relationship: Paul & Timothy



Visual for Lessons 11 & 13. Display this visual as you review the ministries of Paul and Timothy in the first-century church.

The rare phrase, *the law of our ancestors*, is used instead of the more common phrase, “the Law of Moses” (compare Acts 28:23). This phrasing seems intended to establish common ground with the crowd of Jews.

The word *zealous* conveys an image of a fiery and passionate commitment to a cause. Such a disposition could be understood positively (example: John 2:17) or negatively (example: Galatians 4:17). The ancient world tended to associate the word with qualities worthy of emulation. Inter-testamental Judaism associated the term with various religious heroes (examples: see the non-biblical 1 Maccabees 2:23–27, 50–58; the latter section includes a reference to the zeal of Phinehas in Numbers 25:5–13). As such, the term suggests a willingness to resort to violence to defend religious traditions, the holiness of God’s name, or both. Paul’s attitude toward the Scriptures and their application resembles what he says in Galatians 1:14 and Philippians 3:5–6.

B. Persecuted Followers (vv. 4–5)

4. “I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison,

Paul’s address now recalls his participation in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58–8:3; see lesson 10). That event marked the beginning of Paul’s persecution of the church (8:1). His zeal in doing so is further noted in Acts 9:1–2, 14, 21; 26:10–

11; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13–14; Philip-
pians 3:6; 1 Timothy 1:13).

This Way refers to the first-century movement of Jesus-followers (compare Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). The designation aligns with Old Testament references to God’s decreed path of life for the faithful (Psalm 16:11). It also complements Jesus’ description of himself as “the way” (John 14:6; compare Hebrews 10:20; see lesson 9).

5. “as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify, I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

Since Paul once persecuted members of “The Way,” the obvious question arises: Why is he now one of its most prominent proclaimers? He presents himself in terms that establish a common ground with an audience who wants to kill him, so what has changed? Paul answers by recalling the story first narrated in Acts 9.

Previously, Paul (as Saul) operated with the support of *the high priest*—most likely Caiaphas, who held that position until AD 36. Saul intended to carry out his persecutions against the Jewish followers of Jesus in Damascus (compare Acts 9:1–2). The fact that *Damascus* is over 130 miles away from *Jerusalem* highlights Saul’s fanaticism at the time. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, does not specify how the gospel first came to Damas-

cus. But a general clue is found in Acts 2:5, which notes that Jews from “every nation under heaven” gathered for the day of Pentecost. Another clue is in Acts 11:19, which states that after the persecution described in Acts 8, believers scattered “as far as Phoenicia.” That region adjoins Syria, wherein the city of Damascus is located.

II. Encountering the Lord

(Acts 22:6–11)

A. Questions and Revelation (vv. 6–10a)

6. “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me.

The only notable addition of detail here compared to Acts 9:3 is that Paul specifies that this happened *about noon* (compare Acts 26:13). This detail accentuates how brilliant the *light* must have been to be so perceptible at the brightest time of day.

7–8. “I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied.

The opening statement *Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me*, as presented here and in Acts 9:4–5, baffled Saul. Having been overwhelmed by the light to the point that he found himself on *the ground*, all he could do was sputter out the question, *Who are you, Lord?* We should not think that Saul’s use of the word *Lord* necessarily means that he recognized the voice as that of God. The underlying Greek is also used in contexts where it means “sir” (example: Matthew 27:63).

Saul’s confusion likely deepened when the voice identified itself as *Jesus of Nazareth*. There is no record of Saul’s ever having met Jesus prior to this encounter. As Saul’s self-assured confidence in his zealous conduct began to melt away, the implication became clear: to persecute Christians is, in essence, to persecute Jesus himself. This stresses Jesus’ identification with them.

This moment thus began a radical reshaping of everything Saul believed about God, who was at the center of his worldview. This reshaping is

How to Say It

Ananias	An-uh-nye-us.
Aramaic	Air-uh- <i>may</i> -ik.
Caiaphas	Kay-uh-fus or Kye-uh-fus.
Cilicia	Sih-lish-i-uh.
Diaspora	Dee-as-puh-ruh.
Ephesus	Ef-uh-sus.
Gamaliel	Guh- <i>may</i> -lih-ul or Guh- <i>may</i> -lee-al.
Maccabees	Mack-uh-bees.
Nazareth	Naz-uh-reth.
Phinehas	Fin-ee-us.
Tarsus	Tar-sus.
theophany	the- <i>ah</i> -fuh-nee.

reflected in texts such as 1 Corinthians 8:6, where Paul reworks traditional statements of faith, like those found in Deuteronomy 6:4, to include Jesus as both Lord and God. Ultimately, this encounter will also radically reshape how Saul lives, as he will transform from being a persecutor of the church into a chief proclaimer of its gospel in service to this Lord (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13–16, 23; 1 Timothy 1:13). Saul’s transformation began with his interaction on the road, but he would need a lengthy period of growth (Galatians 1:17–18).

9–10a. “My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.

We need to keep in mind who Paul is addressing: a hostile crowd who wants him dead (Acts 21:40)! In response, he tailors his address to emphasize the Lord’s personal revelation to him and his obedient submission to the Lord’s will (compare Galatians 1:11–12).

What we see here in Acts 22:9 is similar to what we read in Acts 9:7, but with two notable variations. Acts 9:7 states that Saul’s traveling companions (1) saw nobody, although they (2) heard the sound. Yet here in Acts 22:9, Paul notes that the companions (1) *saw the light*, but they (2) did not *understand the voice*.

The first difference could simply mean that although able to perceive the light, the companions could not see the person at the center of it. That is hardly surprising if the light was so bright as to be distinguishable from the sun at noon (see commentary on Acts 22:6, above).

The other difference may be explainable in several ways. One way is by examining the differing meanings of the verb translated *understand* as contexts change. In some contexts, the underlying Greek word simply means “to hear” (example: Mark 6:20); in other contexts, the verb takes the more specific meaning of “comprehended” or “understood” (example: 8:18).

The second way is by examining the word translated *voice* in Acts 9:7. It could have the more general meaning of “sound” (example: 1 Corinthians 14:7); if that idea applies here, it suggests that

the companions heard an unidentifiable sound rather than comprehensible voice. Third, and less likely, is the possibility that they perceived someone addressing Saul in a language they could not understand. Acts 26:14 says it was Aramaic (compare Acts 21:40–22:1).

What Do You Think?

Are you in a season of asking God, “What shall I do, Lord”? Why, or why not?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to be better attentive to God’s call on your life?

B. Reply and Command (vv. 10b–11)

10b–11. “‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

The first part of this text reflects Jesus’ words in Acts 9:6 and 26:16, but with a subtle twist. Acts 9:6 states what Saul “must do,” while the passage before us states what Saul was *assigned to do*. That same chapter elaborates on his appointment: he is to witness to God’s “name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

Perhaps Paul opted not to speak of his mission to Gentiles because of the anti-Gentile sentiments present in his hostile audience (Acts 21:27–29; compare 21:19). This seems particularly likely given the crowd’s reaction a few verses later (22:21–22).

What Do You Think?

Have you experienced moments where you felt spiritually “blind” before understanding the truth? Explain.

Digging Deeper

How has God revealed himself to you in ways that changed your perspective or direction?

Tactical Flashlight

I was in the market for a nonlethal self-defense tool and decided to purchase pepper spray. How-

ever, I soon encountered some issues. As I came to find out, pepper spray is considered a “weapon” in certain settings, which means it’s prohibited in some places. Additionally, the canisters can lose pressure over time, and I didn’t want to do periodic test firings.

But then, I came across a self-defense expert on YouTube who suggested a solution that aligned better with my needs: a tactical flashlight. Such a flashlight can emit a powerful beam of light, temporarily blinding and disorienting an attacker. I bought one with a strobe-light feature for increased effect.

Having tried it on myself, I can attest to its extreme brightness. Even so, I know just enough about “lumens” and “lux” to realize that the sun at noon is much brighter—but how much less so than that of the light that blinded Saul, knocking him to the ground! But that’s what it took for Jesus to get his attention. How much does it take for Jesus to get yours? —R. L. N.

III. Commissioned for the Future

(Acts 22:12–15)

A. Renewed Sight (vv. 12–13)

12. “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there.”

Acts 9:10–17 provides a more detailed account of the actions and attitude of *Ananias*. He is designated as “a disciple,” marking him as a follower of Jesus. It’s important to note that this *Ananias* should not be confused with men of the same name mentioned in Acts 5:1–11; 23:1–5; or 24:1. To describe him as *a devout observer of the law* who is *highly respected by all the Jews* suggests that Paul aims to reassure the crowd that a Jew who is above reproach could testify truthfully about Paul’s claims.

13. “He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.”

The content of this verse is a condensed version of Acts 9:17–18. Here, as in 9:17, Ananias reveals a willingness to refer to *Saul* as *brother* because of

the Lord’s revelation to Ananias. This is despite Ananias’s initial consternation about Saul as a persecutor of Christians.

What Do You Think?

Who has been an “Ananias” in your life—someone you respect who God has used to guide or encourage your faith?

Digging Deeper

How can you be that person for someone else?

B. Chosen Witness (vv. 14–15)

14. “Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth.’”

This is not precisely paralleled in Acts 9 since that account does not feature as much dialogue between Ananias and Saul. But it does correspond with what the Lord declares in Acts 9:15. While Luke, the author of Acts, might have wanted to cut down on repetition in chapter 9, Paul needs to include this dialogue from Ananias because his testimony supports Paul’s claims.

A particularly significant aspect of Ananias’s dialogue that makes this point is referring to God as the *God of our ancestors*. This phrase, or a form of it, appears elsewhere in the book of Acts (Acts 5:30; 24:14). Its formulation has significant parallels in the Old Testament (examples: Deuteronomy 26:7; 1 Chronicles 12:17; 29:18). Ananias gives a power promise of God’s fidelity as he connects Old Testament statements with the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. When Saul hears Ananias speak of *the Righteous One*, Saul may recall that Stephen spoke of “the Righteous One” (Jesus) in Acts 7:52 (compare 3:14).

This title, *Righteous One*, appears only twice in the New Testament, both in Acts (here and in Acts 7:52; compare 3:14). This designation highlights Jesus’ innocence and divine vindication. But it also signals his fulfillment of prophetic hopes about God’s “righteous and just” one (the Hebrew and Greek terms can be translated either way).

Acts 3:13–14 shows a connection to Isaiah

53:11 by referring to Jesus as God's servant, making this description resonate with the idea of God's righteous and just servant. It is also possible that the portrayal evokes broader hopes of God's chosen ruler—a just one sent to Jerusalem (Jeremiah 23:5–6; 33:15; Zechariah 9:9).

Unlikely Witness

One of the most memorable books I read as a teenager was *The Cross and the Switchblade*. It tells the story of Nicky Cruz, a notorious gang leader in New York City. His life seemed destined for crime, violence, and destruction. However, an encounter with evangelist David Wilkerson led to a profound transformation: Cruz surrendered his life to Christ. This dramatic change ignited a passion for sharing the gospel, and Cruz became an influential evangelist who continues to reach the very gangs with which he once identified.

What grips me most about this story is how unlikely it was for Cruz to become an evangelist. But his is not the only such account. The apostle Peter, impulsive and impetuous, denied Jesus three times, yet was appointed as a leader of the first-century church. The apostle Paul, a persecutor of Christians, became one of their greatest advocates. These two examples demonstrate God's ability to work through imperfect people, using their unique experiences to advance his kingdom.

Few people today, if any, will experience a "selection process" as Paul did. Most of the time, God will wait patiently for a volunteer—perhaps finding none (compare Ezekiel 22:30). When the need is obvious, will you be the one? —N. V.

15. "You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard."

The commission Paul receives to be Jesus' *witness to all people* is a mark of his becoming a disciple of Jesus. But more specifically, in the context of Acts, it also marks him as participating in the commission bestowed on the apostles (Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 13:31). This is further stressed by reference to what he has *seen and heard*. That phrase conveys the personal experience of the speaker (compare Luke 7:22; Acts 4:20; 1 John 1:1, 3). For the Lord's purposes in making Paul an apostle to

the nations, he needed Paul to be a witness of the risen Jesus. And so Paul experienced Christ firsthand when God interrupted his trip to Damascus.

What Do You Think?

What does it mean to be a witness for God in your own context?

Digging Deeper

How can your personal experiences, the things you have "seen and heard," be a powerful tool for evangelism?

Conclusion

A. Opened Eyes Can Open Other Eyes

It is vital to remember that whenever we read accounts of God's appearing to people, such stories are never the end goal in and of themselves. Such an appearance (called a *theophany*) happens in order to certify something or someone as being of God.

Today, we have the completed witness of the New Testament to guide us. We don't need a theophany, like the one Paul received, to motivate us toward our duty to witness—the New Testament itself is intended to encourage us! God calls his people to align their lives with his path revealed through his Word. Through this alignment, God's Spirit transforms our lives to serve God. As a result, we become agents of the gospel in the world.

Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus was the first step in incorporating him into Christ's body—the church. Our individual stories are part of this larger narrative. Like Paul, who began his extensive work after this encounter, part of glorifying God is edifying others. Let us reflect on our personal life stories in light of what God has done for us so that we may edify others and glorify him.

B. Prayer

God of our ancestors in the faith, help us meld our stories into yours! Guide and empower us to be witnesses so that others may know your salvation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Let God use you for his purposes.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Ask participants to write down three factual statements about themselves: one strength; one weakness; and one neutral, uncontrollable factor, such as their place of birth or family background. Instruct participants to “introduce” themselves to the class or a partner by reading their three statements.

After everyone has introduced themselves, invite each participant to reflect on how God can use both our strengths and weaknesses for his glory. After one minute of silent reflection, ask if any volunteers would like to share their responses.

Lead into Bible study by saying, “It may be easier for us to understand how God might use our strengths, but what about our weaknesses or the factors we have no control over? Today’s study will ‘introduce’ us to Paul and his mission for God.”

Into the Word

Divide participants into two groups: **Synagogue Leaders** and **Church Leaders**. Create two handouts with the headers *Pros* and *Cons* for two columns. Distribute one handout to each group. Instruct each group to read Acts 22:3–5 and write down the pros and cons of Paul’s qualifications for ministry within their assigned religious group. Direct the groups to use this information to determine whether Paul would have been a suitable candidate for leadership in their group. After calling time, ask a volunteer from each group to share their findings and explain their conclusions.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Saul’s Resume” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated. After calling time, ask volunteers to share their responses.

Ask for six volunteers, assigning each to one of the following roles: Saul, Jesus, Companion 1, Companion 2, Cornelius, and Narrator. Have the volunteers reenact the speeches and events from

Acts 22:6–15 while the rest of the class observes. After the performance, ask the class, “What is the most frightening aspect of these scenes, and what is the most amazing? Why?”

Announce a Bible-marking activity. Provide copies of Acts 9:10–19 and Acts 22:12–15 for those who do not want to write in their Bibles. Distribute handouts (you create) with these instructions:

- 1—Underline words or phrases that appear in both passages.
- 2—Draw brackets around words or phrases that appear in only one of the passages.
- 3—Draw a star around the details that you believe are most important.

After completing the activity, ask, “How do you think Ananias felt about what the Lord asked him to do? Why?” Allow time small group discussion.

Option. Invite volunteers to list people from recent history with a reputation among Christ-followers comparable to Saul. Ask, “How would you feel if God gave you the same message for them that he gave to Ananias? How would you respond?”

Into Life

Summarize the study by saying, “Paul shares his story of transformation by detailing his life before meeting Christ, his experience with Christ on the road, and how that interaction changed his life. Every believer has a story of meeting Jesus!”

Distribute a sheet of paper and a pen to each participant. Invite them to write down a brief version of their own story of meeting Jesus and how God used personal weaknesses for good. Allow time for participants to share their testimony in small groups if they choose to do so.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Tell Your Story” exercise from the activity page. Have learners complete the exercise as a take-home activity in the upcoming week.

Timothy, a Leader with a Legacy

Devotional Reading: Matthew 12:46–50

Background Scripture: Acts 16:1–3; Philippians 2:19–22;
2 Timothy 1:1–6; 3:14–16

2 Timothy 1:1–6

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, in keeping with the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

² To Timothy, my dear son:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

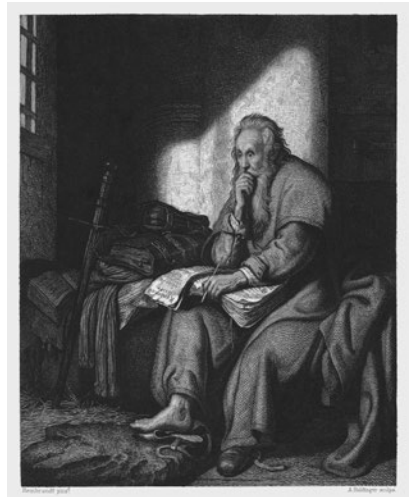
³ I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers.

⁴ Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵ I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

2 Timothy 3:14–16

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,



Key Text

I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. —2 Timothy 1:5

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 3: Faithful Witnesses Spread the Good News

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the parts of Timothy's upbringing that contributed to his identity as a faithful witness.
2. Explain the wisdom that comes from the study of God's Word.
3. List practices that might nurture children into becoming faithful witnesses.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Running Partner for Life
- B. Lesson Context: Paul
- C. Lesson Context: Timothy

I. Sincere Legacy (2 Timothy 1:1–6)

- A. From Father to Son (vv. 1–2)
Father in the Faith
- B. Foundation of Faith (vv. 3–5)
- C. The Gift of God (v. 6)
No Time "Before Christ"

II. Continued Legacy (2 Timothy 3:14–16)

- A. Persist in Learning (v. 14)
- B. Know the Scriptures (vv. 15–16)

Conclusion

- A. Imitation and Encouragement
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Running Partner for Life

The individualism of modern culture takes many forms. Recently, I noticed individualistic tendencies in physical fitness. If we eat a balanced diet, it is because we choose one *ourselves*. If we work out each day, it is because we set *ourselves* a routine. In contrast, my fitness breakthrough came when I invited others to join me.

It took three years, but eventually, I lost 60 pounds. I had to commit to personal change: healthy eating, visiting the gym daily, and running. However, I'm sure I wouldn't have followed through if I had made those changes alone. I needed the support of the people closest to me, especially my wife. She prepared healthy meals for the family, came with me to the gym, and joined me on my runs. Somehow, she anticipated trouble and hang-ups that were positioned to frustrate my fitness goals. When I was tempted to throw in the towel, her kindness and companionship encouraged me to persist in the habits that honored my commitments.

B. Lesson Context: Paul

The persecutor-turned-apostle Paul is responsible for writing a large percentage of the New Testament epistles. He wrote letters to churches and individuals. "Writing" is a flexible term for an era without mail service, widespread literacy, or inexpensive paper. Several of his letters list coauthors: Sosthenes (1 Corinthians 1:1); Timothy (2 Corinthians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; Philemon 1:1); and Silas together with Timothy (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1). Paul also employed the help of specialized scribes, perhaps relying heavily upon them when he was confined in Rome. The writing secretary (called an *amanuensis* in Latin) sometimes carried the letter to its destination, delivering and interpreting the contents. For example, see the commendation of Tychicus in Ephesians 6:21 and Colossians 4:7.

As far as we know, Paul had no children and never married. He had a sister and nephew (Acts 23:16), so he was an uncle. Scripture gives us little information about Paul's parents, but we know

he received high-level religious education, learned tent-making as a trade, and was a Roman citizen. We know he studied under the famous rabbi, Gamaliel, in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3). Paul's relationship with Gamaliel as a spiritual father may have influenced his decision to consider Timothy as a son in the faith (1 Timothy 1:2).

Since Paul's production of letters involved Timothy to a large degree and he thought of Timothy like a son, it is fitting that Paul would write to him when they were apart. Even as Paul endured imprisonment in Rome and his day of martyrdom drew near (around AD 67), he continued planning correspondences. Paul wrote two letters to Timothy while the younger man served as a pastor in Ephesus. Through them, he offered guidance, reassurance, and encouragement. Eventually, Paul requested that Timothy visit him in Rome and "bring . . . the scrolls [and] especially the parchments" (2 Timothy 4:9, 13). In some ways, 2 Timothy reads like a last will and testament, sent from a spiritual father to a spiritual son (4:6; compare Philippians 2:22). As any father would, Paul wished to see Timothy again before he died.

C. Lesson Context: Timothy

Though Timothy is often perceived as a youth, he was approximately 40 years old when he received Paul's second letter. Paul first met Timothy while traveling through Lystra (Acts 16:1–3). According to Acts 16:1, Timothy's mother was Jewish, but his father was Greek. Strict Jews con-

sidered such a relationship dangerous and sometimes even sinful (compare Nehemiah 13:23–27; Ezra 9:1–10:44). Greek culture placed fathers as the head of the household (*paterfamilias*), and therefore, the one responsible for decisions regarding matters of religion. Timothy's Greek paternity is evident in his lack of circumcision, which, as a Jew, should have occurred on the eighth day of his life (Acts 16:3; Leviticus 12:3). However, Timothy possessed some education in Jewish faith by way of his mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5). Much of Timothy's further ministry education and training came from the time he spent with Paul while they served as missionaries planting churches across Macedonia.

I. Sincere Legacy

(2 Timothy 1:1–6)

A. From Father to Son (vv. 1–2)

1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, in keeping with the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

Like other ancient letters, 2 Timothy begins by sharing information that modern letter recipients would find on an envelope. *Paul* identifies himself as the sender and *an apostle of Christ Jesus*. The title "apostle" is significant for Paul because he was not present with Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry. Nonetheless, *God* is the one who commissions Paul by his *will*. Paul reminds the letter's recipient that in *Christ Jesus* we find *life*. Jesus came "that [we] might have life, and . . . to the full" (John 10:10)—it is a *promise*.

2. To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul identifies *Timothy* as the letter's recipient. He describes Timothy in affectionate and familial terms (compare Titus 1:4). Paul considers Timothy not only a *son* but one *dear* to his heart—he is highly cherished.

Grace and *peace* are traditional greetings found in many of Paul's letters. In contrast, the standard salutation in nonreligious Greek writing of the time was a wish for good health. Paul asks instead for marks of spiritual health: God's unearned

How to Say It

amanuensis	uh-man-yew-en-sis.
Ephesus	Ef-uh-sus.
Gamaliel	Guh-may-lih-ul or Guh-may-lee-al.
Habakkuk	Huh-back-kuk.
Lystra	Liss-truh.
Macedonia	Mass-eh-doe-nee-uh.
paterfamilias	pah-ter-fah-mil-ee-us
presbytery	prez-buh-ter-ee.
Septuagint	Sep-too-ih-jent.
Sosthenes	Soss-thuh-nee-z.
Tychicus	Tick-ih-cuss.

favor (*grace*) and an anticipation of wholeness in God's restorative work (*peace*). Paul also adds the term *mercy*, which indicates a desire for God's compassionate treatment. As a father in the faith, Paul desires the fullness of favor, compassion, and wholeness for his son.

Father in the Faith

Joe grew up in a single-parent household and wished for a father. He loved his mother and admired her grit, but he spent long hours alone after school and on weekends while she worked two jobs. When Joe was young, he stayed in the house with the doors locked. As he grew older, Joe went home with friends for dinner and to do homework. Participation in other households provided the chance to observe how different families interacted. He witnessed the ways other parents demonstrated love for their children. Joe paid careful attention to the dads.

Joe was in middle school when a friend invited him to church. There, he met a youth pastor with whom he formed a special bond. Quickly, Joe became a regular part of this church community. He was baptized and became a true son in the faith to this pastor. Their friendship continues to this day.

Scripture says little about Timothy's biological father, but we know he had a strong spiritual father in Paul. Who are your mentors, guides, and spiritual parents in the faith? —L. M. W.

B. Foundation of Faith (vv. 3–5)

3. I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers.

This verse begins a sentence in Greek that stretches to the end of verse 5. It is customary in ancient letters to include a note of thanksgiving. Paul offers his gratitude to *God* and then connects his mention of God to the legacy of Jewish and Israelite *ancestors*. In other letters, Paul defends the continuity between his faith and the devotion of Jewish predecessors: those who “have faith” are “children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:7–9). Here, he makes the connection more personal—he continues to serve the same God as his Jewish forebears.

By reiterating his spiritual heritage, Paul emphasizes the importance of faith that is passed down from one generation to the next.

Paul also introduces the topic of remembrance as he describes the consistent *prayers* he offers for Timothy. He is reflecting upon their relationship from the vantage point of many years of fruitful association. Paul's son in the faith comes to mind throughout the *night and day*. Such frequent prayers indicate deep and enduring love. They model a vital facet of spiritual mentorship: prayers of intercession.

What Do You Think?

Who are your spiritual ancestors?

Digging Deeper

In what ways are you supporting the faith of future generations?

4. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy.

Paul wants to *see* Timothy in person. There is no substitute for face-to-face interactions with our loved ones! In other epistles, Paul also expresses a longing to see his ministry partners (Romans 1:11). Typically, he intends to do the traveling (15:23; 1 Thessalonians 3:10–11), but in this case, Paul must rely on Timothy to come to him (see Lesson Context: Paul).

The term *recalling* is a form of “remember” (compare Matthew 5:23; 26:75; Luke 23:42; 24:8; Acts 11:16). Paul may remember a previous moment of connection or refer to a message he received from Timothy. He may be acknowledging Timothy's difficulties in opposition to false teachers and the backsliding of close companions (1 Timothy 1:3–7, 18–19).

Paul indicates that the resolution of his wish (and perhaps Timothy's sorrow) shall come at their next meeting. Even without the physical attainment of Paul's desire, his words speak *joy* and encouragement into a season of grief.

5. I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

This verse ends the lengthy sentence that began

Is your legacy marked by sincere faith?



Visual for Lesson 12. Display the visual in a prominent place. Point to the visual and ask the class to spend one minute contemplating the question.

in verse 3. Paul now purposefully remembers Timothy's *sincere faith*. The adjective translated as "sincere" means "without acting" or "without putting on a show." Paul knows that Timothy's faith is genuine, giving him confidence in his protégé. Moreover, Paul reminds Timothy that he has a legacy of faith from his *grandmother Lois* and his *mother Eunice*.

There is little information about Lois and Eunice in Scripture. Therefore, there are at least two ways of interpreting Paul's statement. First, Lois and Eunice were Jewish followers of Christ, making Timothy a third-generation Christian. Acts 16:1 calls Timothy's mother "faithful" (translated "a believer"), which could mean that she received the good news of Jesus before Paul arrived in Lystra. Second, since Paul is drawing a parallel to himself—as he connects his faith to the worship of his Jewish ancestors (verse 3 above)—it is also possible that Paul is describing the continuity between Timothy's obedient Jewish training and his later reception of the gospel. In a broad sense, Paul credits Timothy's faith to his Jewish mother and grandmother, who taught him the truths of God from the Old Testament. It may not have been easy for Lois and Eunice to teach Timothy about God since Timothy's father was Greek (Acts 16:1). Timothy's mixed heritage (the son of a Jewish woman and a Greek man) makes him a living parable of Christ's reconciliation, which brings Jews and Gentiles together as one people (see Ephesians 2:13–18).

Paul is impressed with Timothy's faith—he was from their first meeting (Acts 16:1–3). He knows Timothy has not abandoned his devotion to God or renounced the truths he learned in childhood. Paul encourages Timothy to remember that his legacy comes from God.

What Do You Think?

Who do you know who has "sincere" faith? How does it influence you?

Digging Deeper

What habits or rhythms of remembrance do you use to keep such examples of faith in the forefront of your mind?

C. The Gift of God (v. 6)

6. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

Paul changes the subject, now encouraging Timothy toward action. He asks Timothy not to let his *gift* drift into stagnancy. The Greek verb translated *fan into flame* is used to describe nursing a spark—one nearly extinguished or burning low. Other English translations ask Timothy to "stir up" his gift. Utilizing that metaphor, we may consider Newton's First Law of Motion or Inertia: "An object in motion stays in motion." The converse is also true—it takes energy and force to initiate motion in resting objects. Paul knows it is important for Timothy to keep his spiritual fervor animated. The spread of the gospel message needs ministers who remain active, alert, and passionate about the work of God in their lives.

Timothy's *gift* is not formally stated but may refer to his leadership, teaching, or shepherding abilities. Later in the letter, Paul also mentions this gift (1 Timothy 4:14). There, Paul calls it "your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you." In both places, the *laying on of . . . hands* is significant. The purposeful gesture could refer to the transference of a miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit, like those listed in 1 Corinthians 12:7–10 (healing, performing miracles, prophesying,

etc.). However, it certainly refers to Timothy's ministerial commission. By placing their hands upon Timothy, church leaders granted him authority, charged him with the responsibility of ministry leadership, and affirmed his call.

What Do You Think?

In what ways can you encourage others to keep their spiritual fire aflame?

Digging Deeper

What are you doing to “fan into flame” your faith, ministry gifts, and commitment to God’s calling?

No Time “Before Christ”

I was preparing the testimony for my baptism, and I struggled with the question, “Where does my story begin?” My pastor encouraged me to discuss my “BC life” (as in, “before Christ”). I knew what he meant and was happy to tell of God’s work in my life. However, the idea bothered me because I knew that God was faithful to me *long* before I was ready to accept Christ. I kept thinking, “I don’t think there was a time before Christ.” You see, friends prayed, teachers planted seeds of wisdom, and God pursued me with sign after sign of his love.

None of us have ever lived in a “BC world.” Jesus was with the Father from the beginning, and Christ rescued us, even while we remained enemies of God (Romans 5:10). Have you thanked God for his faithfulness to you even before you called yourself a believer? Can you identify how God prepared you to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus? —J. D.

II. Continued Legacy

(2 Timothy 3:14–16)

A. Persist in Learning (v. 14)

14. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,

Paul encourages Timothy to persist. It is one thing to learn something, and it is another to be entirely confident (*convinced*) of its truth. The verb

translated *become convinced of* is from the same root as the word for “faith.” The things Timothy knows fill him with faith. Remembering and trusting in his education will allow confidence and steadfastness to remain in motion. Just before this verse, Paul reminds Timothy that he is also full of endurance and tenacity (2 Timothy 3:10–13). Now he reminds Timothy that his teachers are trustworthy, and that Timothy knows the integrity of his mentor.

B. Know the Scriptures (vv. 15–16)

15. And how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Paul returns to the idea that Timothy learned the Scriptures and truths of God from his mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5). What Paul calls *Holy Scriptures* cannot refer to a complete Bible as modern Christians understand it, since Timothy’s childhood came before most of the New Testament was written. Paul is referring to the Old Testament, particularly the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, which Paul frequently quotes in his letters.

Paul gives a theological reason for Scripture as the basis for *faith*: Scripture’s contents make a person *wise* and lead toward *salvation*. Salvation comes to fruition through the Messiah, who is *Christ Jesus*. Paul encourages Timothy to remember the incredible tool that he has in his ministry toolbox: long-term knowledge of God’s Word.

What Do You Think?

What is your history with Scripture? How do you stand firm on the things you know? How does Scripture increase wisdom?

Digging Deeper

What study tools do you use to thoroughly learn the Holy Scriptures?

16. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

Paul still has the Old Testament in mind as he

speaks of *all Scripture*. Paul was masterful at demonstrating the truth of the gospel from texts like Habakkuk 2:4, “The righteous person will live by his faithfulness” (quoted in Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11). Now we may extend the same principles to the New Testament, including the letters of Paul! Second Peter 3:15–16 describes Paul’s letters as containing wisdom, as with “other Scriptures.”

Paul names two essential truths that apply to Scripture: it is *God-breathed* and *useful*. First, the message is from *God*. The single word translated *God-breathed* is a rare compound word. It is possibly original to Paul. This type of original language use is like Shakespeare and other gifted writers who adaptively invent language to communicate new ideas. Paul uses this word to describe the God-givenness of Scripture. Timothy can trust the Scriptures because God is the life force behind them. As 2 Peter 1:20–21 explains, “No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” God’s Word is entirely true because God cannot lie (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), but God works through human agency, using human writers.

Second, Paul affirms Scripture’s utility. It is helpful for teaching reliable doctrine about God and our proper response to him. Scripture serves as reproof by identifying wrong and sinful behavior (*rebuking*), giving correction, and describing the right way to live. Scripture demonstrates how to live in holiness according to the standard set forth by God. By knowing God’s instructions, Paul recognizes that Timothy will “understand what is right and just and fair—every good path” (Proverbs 2:9).

Conclusion

A. Imitation and Encouragement

Timothy had a surrogate parent and mentor in Paul. Paul lived a life worthy of imitation and spent significant time reaching out to his son in the faith to encourage and support him. Through

Paul’s writings, we learn essential truths about Timothy that help us identify him as a faithful witness of Christ.

Timothy’s rich heritage of faith was passed to him by his mother, grandmother, and spiritual father. Strong parental influence in faith is an incredible blessing. May we all find the mentors we need for steady growth in discipleship, and may we, in turn, develop into devoted mentors ourselves! Timothy’s example shows us that spiritual heritage comes from various places. If you lack spiritual support from your family of origin or extended family, don’t dismiss the power of relationships built out of a church family.

God gave Timothy a gift, a church leadership position, and beloved relationships. He had a spark implanted in him that remained burning. Timothy had endurance, a long memory, diligent trust in God, and supportive, helpful companions on the journey. He didn’t succumb to discouragement in the face of hardship and opposition. However, Timothy’s success didn’t come through individualistic means. He submitted to relationships that supported him through tough times.

What Do You Think?

Do you think discipleship and ministry are designed to be done alone? How do Mark 6:7; Acts 13:2–3; and Hebrews 10:24–25 influence your answer?

Digging Deeper

In what specific ways are you leaning on the community of faith?

B. Prayer

Father God, we are grateful for our spiritual fathers and mothers. Develop us into godly mentors and leaders as well. Help us to faithfully encourage our fellow believers when they face discouragement and persecution. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Remember your faith heritage and trust Scripture’s instruction.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Before class begins, write, “Mentors help form our faith” on the board. As class starts, hand an index card and pen to each student. Ask students to take one minute to reflect on the mentors and family members who have deeply formed their faith. Ask them to write as many names as desired on their card. Then give the class two minutes to consider a strong belief those mentors were a part of forming. Ask students to flip over their index cards and write that belief on the back. (*Examples:* God loves me; God is trustworthy; the Holy Spirit uses Scripture powerfully; and Scripture holds the words of life.) Lead a discussion allowing students to share about their mentors and how wisdom and encouragement have formed or strengthened them.

Option. Ask the class to think of a song or a hymn that expresses the importance of encouragement and love in the body of Christ. (*Examples:* “They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love” or “O Church Arise.”)

Lead into Bible study by saying, “Our lesson today revolves around Timothy and the spiritual mentorship he received from his grandmother Lois, mother Eunice, and the apostle Paul.”

Into the Word

Divide the class into four groups: **Faith**, **Family**, **Grandparents**, and **Encouragers**. Distribute a piece of paper to each group. Direct groups to read 2 Timothy 1:1–6 and complete the assigned task.

Faith Group: Read the Scripture text and list every word or phrase about passing along the faith. Make notes beside these words or phrases about lessons learned.

Family Group: Read the Scripture text and write down ideas about how families may pass on faith. From your experiences and knowledge, list additional tips or principles for bringing up children to know and serve the Lord.

Grandparents Group: *If there are grandparents present in the class, you may wish to create a special group with this challenge.* Read the Scripture text and write down ideas about how grandparents may play a significant role in passing faith to grandchildren. From your experiences and observations, list additional ideas or tips in helping grandchildren discover the Lord.

Encouragers Group: Make two columns on your sheet of paper with the headings *Encouraging Children* and *Encouraging Young Adults*. Read the Scripture text and write down ideas about how your congregation may encourage its younger people.

Call groups back together. Ask for a volunteer from each group to share their ideas with the class.

Ask a volunteer to read 2 Timothy 3:14–16 out loud. Compile a list on the board of things Paul wants Timothy to know about Scripture. Read the passage a second time if needed.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Letter to a Mentor” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Instruct students to complete it as indicated.

Into Life

Divide the class into groups of two or three. Ask groups to brainstorm one or two things they think would encourage new believers or children in their faith. Ask groups to be specific about practices that might nurture faithful witness in the young. Then lead a discussion based on each group’s brainstorming. Write their answers on the board under the original heading (“Mentors help form our faith”).

Option. Distribute copies of the “Letter to a Mentee” exercise from the activity page. Instruct students to complete it as indicated.

Lead the class in prayer for young believers and children. Ask students to spend one minute asking God to bring a particular person to mind who they feel called to support in life and faith. Allow time for “popcorn” prayers for these believers.

Lydia, the Generous Hostess

Devotional Reading: James 2:14–26
Background Scripture: Acts 16:11–40

Acts 16:11–15, 40

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in

purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

⁴⁰ After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.



Key Text

When [Lydia] and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. —Acts 16:15

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 3: Faithful Witnesses Spread the Good News

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the circumstances that God used to bring the good news of Jesus to Lydia's household.
2. Explain why acts of hospitality were vital for Christians of the first century.
3. Make a plan to practice hospitality as a characteristic of his or her own faithful witness.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. I Was a Stranger
- B. Lesson Context

I. Encouraging Encounters (Acts 16:11–15)

- A. Traveling from Troas (vv. 11–12)
- B. Encountering Lydia (vv. 13–14)
- C. Believing and Baptizing (v. 15)

Breaking Barriers with Hospitality

II. Heartfelt Hospitality (Acts 16:40)

- A. Out of Prison (v. 40a)
- B. Place of Refuge (v. 40b)

A Stranger's Kindness

Conclusion

- A. Practicing Hospitality
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. I Was a Stranger

After college, I accepted an internship on the other side of the country. For the first time, I was far away from family, friends, and everything familiar. The roads were confusing, the air smelled different, and the local accents took some time to decode. I loved my internship but often felt alone in this unfamiliar place.

I tried to find new friends at church, but the hospitality felt quite cold. While some people greeted me at the door with smiles and goodie bags, no one tried to learn my name or where I was from. Even after attending services for a few weeks, no one seemed to recognize me.

However, an older couple from work showed me generous hospitality that changed everything. They took time to listen to me, invited me into their home for meals, and even took me to the doctor's office when I was sick. When I felt unsafe in my housing situation, they offered me a place to stay. Their kindness and generosity made all the difference. I was a stranger, but they showed me hospitality (compare Hebrews 13:2).

The Bible teaches us to show hospitality to others (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9; 3 John 8; etc.). Jesus himself teaches that when believers extend hospitality to "the least of these brothers and sisters of mine," it is regarded as being done unto the Lord himself (Matthew 25:34–40). Today's study provides a first-century example of hospitality toward a stranger. Through this example, we will see how Christian love is embodied.

B. Lesson Context

Beginning in Acts 13:1, the book of Acts focuses on the missionary travels of the apostle Paul. The church in Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas to carry the gospel beyond that Syrian city to the regions of Cyprus (a large island), Pisidia, Pamphylia, and Galatia. We often refer to this as Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:1–14:28).

On the next missionary journey (Acts 15:36–18:22), Paul and Silas visited the previous locations but also pushed farther west toward Roman Asia. This expedition was almost blown apart at

the outset when Paul and Barnabas had a tense disagreement over the advisability of taking along John Mark, a relative of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10). Therefore, they divided into two teams: Barnabas and John Mark returned to the island of Cyprus (Acts 15:39), the home territory of Barnabas (4:36), while Paul recruited Silas, a respected church leader (15:22), to accompany him (15:40–41).

Paul then traveled to Lystra, where he met with Timothy and invited him to join the missionary journey (Acts 16:1–5). Paul and his companions then traveled through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia. They reached the port city of Troas, located at the northern end of the Aegean Sea, where Paul received a vision of an unknown man from Macedonia who invited the apostle to come to that region (16:8–10). It is at this point in Paul's second missionary journey that we arrive at today's lesson. The year is around AD 50, and it has been some 15 years since Paul's encounter with the resurrected Christ (see lesson 11).

I. Encouraging Encounters

(Acts 16:11–15)

A. Travels from Troas (vv. 11–12)

11. From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis.

Having received the vision of a man from Macedonia in the verse just before this one, Paul sets out *from Troas* across the Aegean Sea with Silas and Timothy (see Lesson Context). The first-person plural pronoun *we* suggests that Luke, the author of the book of Acts, accompanies them.

Samothrace is a small island-city off the eastern coast of Macedonia. It is about 50 miles northwest of Troas. The prevailing winds in the northern part of the Aegean Sea are from the northeast, so the ship makes good time to *Neapolis*, about 70 miles from Samothrace. Neapolis serves as the port city for Philippi, which is about 10 miles inland (contrast the five days a journey in the opposite direction takes in Acts 20:6).

12. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that dis-

trict of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

Philippi is a city with a rich history. Named after Philip II, the city came under Roman control in 168 BC. Philippi is located on a major Roman highway, resulting in significant trade traffic across the region. Therefore, it is an important Roman commercial and administrative center in the heart of the Greco-Roman world. Philippi is populated with retired Roman soldiers and not many Jews.

The ministry of Paul and his companions lasts a period of *several days*, which may mean a stretch as short as a week.

What Do You Think?

How can you help your church enhance ministry to believers whose occupations require travel?

Digging Deeper

In what ways can you partner with congregations in other towns to achieve this goal?

B. Encountering Lydia (vv. 13–14)

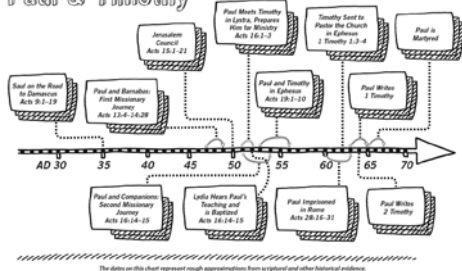
13. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

Paul's usual pattern is first to go to the local synagogue when beginning a ministry in a new city (see Acts 13:14; 14:1; 18:4). In Philippi, however, the procedure is different. Given Philippi's history as a Roman colony, it is possible that not enough Jews live there to call for a synagogue. By Jewish tradition, it takes at least 10 Jewish men to constitute a proper synagogue.

First-century Jewish religious practices seem to necessitate running water for ritual cleansing practices. Therefore, if no synagogue was present in Philippi, then a location by *the river* would be ideal for Jews to gather for *prayer* and worship. The *river* in question may be the Gangites River, about a mile from town.

In first-century Macedonia, *women* experience more independence than they do in other ancient Greco-Roman contexts. In Philippi, in particular,

Chronology of Relationship: Paul & Timothy



Visual for Lessons 11 & 13. Display this visual as you review the ministries of Paul and Timothy in the first-century church.

women held leadership roles in various places for pagan and cultic worship, especially in the temple of Artemis located there.

Most women in this era were expected to follow the religious practices of their husbands. Roman men, however, often complained of the influence of foreign (non-Greco-Roman) religions on their wives. Historians of the period report that a significant number of Gentile women converted to Judaism or were drawn to worship alongside Jewish women. Therefore, it is not surprising that Paul would interact with both Jewish and Gentile women. Furthermore, women played significant roles in the growth of the first-century church (examples: Acts 18:2; Philippians 4:3). At this riverside, Paul meets a woman who would become a key member of the forthcoming church in Philippi.

14a. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth.

The name *Lydia* is notable because it is also the name of a district in the Roman province of Asia Minor. Some commentators suggest that this *woman* may have been formerly enslaved, as it was common for enslaved individuals to be named after their homeland.

Lydia's hometown, *Thyatira*, is the capital of the district of Lydia and is located on the other side of the Aegean Sea, about 100 miles southeast of Troas (compare Revelation 2:18–29). The city is

known for producing dyed textiles, with purple being especially prominent. The process of creating purple dye in the first century was unpleasant and often smelly, as it involved extraction from the murex snail. Consequently, *purple cloth* was typically the most expensive textile, reserved for the wealthy and often worn by royalty. As a *dealer* or trader of this dye, Lydia is likely a woman of significant financial means.

14b. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

The description of Lydia as a *worshiper of God* has three possible interpretations: (1) she is Jewish, (2) she is a convert to Judaism, or (3) she is a God-fearing Gentile, similar to Cornelius (see Acts 10:2). The third option is the most likely. The Greek word translated *worshiper* is the same term used to refer to the Gentile converts who follow God (Acts 13:43; 17:17).

Despite her independence and wealth, Lydia's *heart* is ready for the message of Christ. After hearing *Paul's message*, she does not spend the upcoming week reflecting on the message. Instead, as Paul speaks the word of God, her heart is *opened* by the *Lord*, perhaps indicating that he removes any misconceptions that may prevent her from accepting a crucified Messiah. This event echoes the events described in the conclusion of Luke's Gospel. During a post-resurrection appearance to his disciples, Jesus "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

What Do You Think?

Have you ever had a moment when you felt God opening your heart to something new? How did you respond?

Digging Deeper

What steps can you take to be better attentive to the Spirit's leading?

C. Believing and Baptizing (v. 15)

15a. When she and the members of her household were baptized,

Lydia's decision of faith is followed by her baptism. The text gives the impression that this happens quickly, possibly on the same day.

Throughout the book of Acts, faith and baptism are often mentioned together. For example, the Samaritans who listened to Philip's preaching believed and were baptized (Acts 8:12). The Ethiopian eunuch, after hearing Phillip's proclamation of the gospel, immediately expressed his desire to be baptized (8:35–38). Likewise, the Philippian jailer and his family were baptized (16:31–33). The Corinthians who listened to Paul's preaching also believed and were baptized (18:8). Lydia's conversion follows the same pattern.

This is the first mention in the book of Acts of a *household* receiving baptism. The second instance occurs shortly thereafter (Acts 16:33; see also 1 Corinthians 1:16). The text does not provide details about the composition of Lydia's household. Since her household follows her lead in baptism, she may be a widow, thereby the head of the household with authority over those in it.

15b. she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

Lydia is no longer merely a “worshiper of God” (Acts 16:14, above). She experiences a shift in identity that leads her to be a *believer in the Lord*. This change leads her to make a proposal that must not be overlooked. The book of Acts often describes the heart of the person after baptism. In the case of the Ethiopian, he left rejoicing (Acts 8:39). The Philippian jailer is filled with joy but also brings the missionaries into his house and prepares a meal for them (16:34). In this case, part of Lydia's response after her baptism is her insistence that Paul and his companions come lodge at her *house*—a response full of generosity and hospitality.

Such an invitation may be a dangerous arrangement for Lydia. There is potential resistance from her surrounding community that may be opposed to the gospel—like the mob in Ephesus (Acts 19:28). Lydia can invite the missionaries to stay in her home. But she cannot guarantee what the reaction of the neighbors will be. Her invitation, more than just an inconvenience to her busy schedule, is an act of courage.

Additionally, accepting her invitation would be courageous for Paul and his companions. Although Lydia had been worshipping and pray-

ing with Jews in Philippi, she is likely not Jewish. Consequently, it is unlikely that her household adheres to Jewish purity laws. Paul's acceptance of her invitation to hospitality implies that he, a Jew, agrees to stay in the home of a Gentile. Such an occurrence is not new by this point in the first-century church (compare Acts 10:9–48). Even so, the decision to stay in the house of a Gentile would have caught the attention of any other Jews in Macedonia.

Acts of hospitality played a vital role in ancient cultures, especially in Jewish culture. These acts included welcoming and caring for travelers, out-of-town visitors, and even strangers, as Genesis 18:1–8 demonstrates. In a time without hotel chains as we know them, the offering of generous hospitality provided a safe place for an individual to rest, have a meal, and care for their animals if they had any. In some areas of the ancient world that are characterized by harsh climates and limited access to water, providing hospitality could mean the difference between life and death for a traveler.

What Do You Think?

How can you be more intentional about welcoming and serving others, both in your church and in your neighborhood?

Digging Deeper

What barriers prevent you from doing so, and how will you address these issues?

Breaking Barriers with Hospitality

I sat in the sweltering heat and humidity of Colombo, the largest city in Sri Lanka. From my observations, a social hierarchy among its residents was evident. Certain areas of the city seemed affluent, while others appeared dilapidated and deprived of wealth. On this particular afternoon, I had the privilege of meeting a local church and governmental leader for lunch.

Halfway through the meal, there was a knock on the door. My new friend excused himself, walked to the front door, and opened it without hesitation. Within seconds, seven men in orange jumpsuits surrounded him. These men were

responsible for cleaning the city streets and were regarded as part of the lowest social class. With a warm smile, the leader greeted each man by name and invited them into the house. I later learned that this was a common occurrence; in fact, as many as 25 of these men shared a Christmas meal in that house.

His habits of hospitality moved me. He served people whom society had deemed “less than.” In doing so, he demonstrated the radical nature of Christian hospitality—one that transcends social boundaries (see Luke 14:12–14).

Lydia’s display of hospitality to Paul was equally radical. Would she lose influence in her community by inviting Jewish men to stay in her home? What would it look like for you to show radical hospitality to those groups that your community has deemed “less than”? —N. V.

III. Heartfelt Hospitality

(Acts 16:40)

A. Out of Prison (v. 40a)

40a. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison,

A dangerous situation resulted in Paul and Silas facing time in *prison*. While still in Philippi, Paul encountered an enslaved woman who possessed a spirit of fortune-telling. She followed Paul and his companions around town, proclaiming their movements and intentions (Acts 16:16–17). Annoyed by her presence and actions, Paul eventually cast out the spirit from her (16:18). This act angered her owners, who were upset about the loss of income caused by the removal of the spirit. They mobilize the townspeople and the authorities against Paul and Silas (16:19–20). Consequently, the two were beaten and thrown into jail (16:22–24).

That night, Paul and his companions experience a miraculous release when an earthquake breaks their chains (Acts 16:26). Rather than retaliate against the jailer, they convert him and his household to faith in Christ (16:28–32). The following morning, after Paul proclaims his Roman citizenship, the authorities escort him and his companions from the prison and request that they leave Philippi (16:35–39).

B. Place of Refuge (v. 40b)

40b. they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.

The shift in narrative from first-person “us” (Acts 16:15b, above) to the third-person *they* indicates that Luke is likely no longer with Paul at this point in the journey.

Before departing from Philippi, Paul and Silas feel compelled to stop again at *Lydia’s house* to rest and recover after being released from prison. Their upcoming travels will lead them to Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth (Acts 17–18). Thus the gospel will spread despite (or because of) persecution.

Once again, Lydia’s hospitality takes center stage. This stop also gives Paul and Silas a chance to see and comfort *the brothers and sisters* of Christ-followers. For these meetings to occur, a suitable location is needed, and Lydia’s home serves this purpose. Lydia’s house is not only open to the missionaries but also welcomes other members of the first-century church in Philippi, suggesting that her home is quite spacious by the standards of that era. Later, perhaps Paul’s letter to the Philippians would be read aloud in her house. Despite the

How to Say It

Aegean	A-jee-un.
Amphipolis	Am-fip-o-liss.
Antioch	An-tee-ock.
Ephesus	Ef-uh-sus.
Galatia	Guh-lay-shuh.
Lydia	Lid-ee-uh.
Lystra	Liss-truh.
Macedonia	Mass-eh-doe-nee-uh.
Neapolis	Nee-ap-o-lis.
Pamphylia	Pam-fill-ee-uh.
Philippi	Fih-lip-pie or Fil-ih-pie.
Phrygia	Frij-e-uh.
Syrian	Sear-ee-un.
Thessalonica	Thess-uh-lo-nye-kuh (th as in <i>thin</i>).
Thyatira	Thy-uh-tie-ruh (th as in <i>thin</i>).
Troas	Tro-az.

potential risk from pagan neighbors, Lydia shows hospitality to those who travel to preach the gospel of Christ.

What Do You Think?

Who in your life encouraged you in your faith after you faced a trial? What actions did they take?

Digging Deeper

How can you be that person for someone else?

A Stranger's Kindness

Growing up in South Africa, my family enjoyed many outdoor adventures. One memorable experience came when my father took my brothers and me on a hike along the rocks and cliffs near Kini Bay, a small beach near the city of Gqeberha.

We set off barefoot and without mobile phones, expecting a scenic five-kilometer loop—approximately three miles of hiking. As the sun began to set and evening approached, rain showers appeared, and my brothers and I started to wonder whether our father really did know the way home. “It’s just beyond that corner!” he would say. However, each time we looked ahead, we realized another stretch of cliffs lay before us.

With sore feet and tired legs, we finally reached a small village well after dark. We knocked on several doors, hoping someone would answer and allow us to borrow their phone to call our mother. Most doors remained closed, and one even slammed in our faces. Eventually, a kind lady took pity on a father and his three young, rain-drenched, shoeless children on her doorstep. She welcomed us into her home and helped us call for help.

There’s something about showing hospitality that reminds me that we are all made in God’s image and that we are all sometimes in need of compassion. The Lord has welcomed us into his home and calls us to practice hospitality with others—even strangers. How will you show hospitality to strangers in the upcoming week? You never know who you might be serving (see Hebrews 13:2).
—N. V.

Conclusion

A. Practicing Hospitality

Acts of hospitality serve as a faithful witness to the life-changing effect of the gospel. Hospitality is essentially “love in action.” When we show hospitality, we demonstrate our love for God and others.

Lydia exemplified this by providing a welcoming space for people to gather, share meals, engage in fellowship and prayer, and encounter Christ. Imagine Paul’s experience in Philippi without Lydia’s hospitality; he would have lacked a base for his ministry and somewhere to return to after being released from prison.

In today’s world, hospitality doesn’t have to mean opening your home to missionaries, though that is one way to express it. It can involve sharing a meal with new members of your church community, providing space for prayer and fellowship, or simply being attentive to the needs of your neighbors.

Hospitality should never be used as an opportunity to show off; rather, it should be an expression of love that comes from experiencing the ultimate expression of love: salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Lydia encountered this transforming love and, in turn, used her hospitality to change the lives of others. How will you use your hospitality to make a difference in the lives of those around you?

What Do You Think?

How has this lesson changed your perspective on hospitality?

Digging Deeper

How is hospitality an act of serving Christ himself (see Matthew 25:34–40)?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for Lydia’s example of faithfulness and hospitality. We ask that your Spirit transform our hearts so that we may be hospitable people. Strengthen us to be willing to open our hearts and homes to welcome others, even strangers. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God grows the church through our hospitality.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Prepare 11 index cards with the following sets of letters front and back, respectively: *H* and *E*; *O* and *V*; *S* and *A*; *P* and *N*; *I* and *G*; *T* and *E*; *A* and *L*; *L* and *I*; *I* and *S*; *T* and *M*; *Y* and an exclamation point. Display the cards so that the word *hospitality* is spelled. (One way to display the cards would be to attach them to the wall with reusable adhesive.)

Say, “Our study today is a lesson about Christian hospitality. Related to hospitality is another Christian responsibility. Behind each of these cards is another letter. Try to guess the letters that will reveal the second Christian responsibility we will examine in today’s lesson. As you correctly guess a letter, I will turn over the corresponding card.” Allow students to suggest letters until someone correctly identifies the word *evangelism*.

Then lead into Bible study by saying, “Lydia’s hospitality resulted from Paul’s evangelism. In turn, that hospitality provided an excellent opportunity for more evangelism.”

Into the Word

Present the following quiz and direct students to answer each question with a verse number from today’s text in Acts 16:11–15, 40. (Verse references to answers are given in parentheses.)

- ___ 1. What was Lydia’s source of livelihood? (*v. 14a*)
- ___ 2. What city was Lydia from? (*v. 14a*)
- ___ 3. Who comforted whom when Paul and Silas were finally released from imprisonment? (*v. 40b*)
- ___ 4. Where did people assemble for prayer in Philippi? (*v. 13*)
- ___ 5. What did Lydia and others in her household do when they accepted Jesus? (*v. 15*)
- ___ 6. What kind of sailing weather did Paul encounter from Troas to Neapolis? (*v. 11*)
- ___ 7. After Neapolis, where did Paul travel? (*v. 12*)

Recruit a volunteer to act out the following monologue as Lydia. Be sure to give her a copy of the monologue in time for preparation.

“When Paul and Silas were arrested, the news came back to me immediately. Philippi is not the kind of city where such an event escapes notice. Those rascals using that poor girl with a demon’s voice would not lose their profit quietly, you understand. Paul and Silas were my honored houseguests. I first thought, *Lydia, you must rush down to the jail and see what you can do*. But family and household members warned me, saying, ‘Lydia, to do so is dangerous. You must not go!’ All we could do was pray and wait to see the outcome.

“My mind returned to that Saturday evening by the river. Devoted women from all over Philippi were there to pray and worship, for we had no synagogue hall. When strangers arrived, we were leery, but Paul’s words clearly were from God.

“We were in the right place. When Paul pictured the death and resurrection of Christ, his instruction to be baptized brought no objections.

“I was exultant. Everything seemed so new. My house is large, but it had the lonely emptiness of business. So I invited Paul and his company to stay with us. What a blessed time we had!”

Option. Distribute copies of the “Finding the Way” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners complete it as a take-home activity.

Into Life

Lead into the activity by saying, “Lydia demonstrated hospitality as a characteristic of her faithful witness to the transforming power of the gospel. The New Testament encourages us to follow her example and extend hospitality to others.” Lead a brainstorming session with the class about how believers can show hospitality as a characteristic of their faithful witness. Write responses on the board. Then ask participants to work with a partner to select one of the listed ways and make a plan to practice it in the upcoming week.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Planning Hospitality” exercise from the activity page. Have participants complete it individually in a minute or less before discussing conclusions with a partner.

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