

Distinctive Marks of the New Testament Church

Kingdom People in a Waiting World

Luke and Acts

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Buckie Baptist Church

Introduction

At the end of **Acts 2**, Luke describes what was happening in the fledgling Church:

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2:43-47, NRSVA¹

There are similar ‘summary’ statements, or key moments, across the book of Acts in

- **Acts 2:43-47**
- **Acts 4:32-37**
- **Acts 5:12-16**
- **Acts 6:7**
- **Acts 9:31**

¹ All scriptures are cited from the New revised Standard Version [Anglicised], unless otherwise stated.

- **Acts 11:19-26**
- **Acts 12:1-17**
- **Acts 13:1-3**
- **Acts 16:5**
- **Acts 19:20**
- **Acts 28:30-31**

They tell the story of a growing and advancing Church. But the early Church did not advance because life was easier then than it is today. Rather, it advanced because Jesus was alive, the Spirit was poured out, the Word was proclaimed, prayer was central, mission was non-negotiable, and the return of Christ was expected. Those are the marks of the early church that I want to consider across this week. I will explore with you what made this Church so effective, trying to learn from their example - both the good things they did and the mistakes they made.

T. R. Glover (1969 - 1943), the classical historian who lectured in Cambridge, made a famous observation that gives what I want to explore with you this week a useful historical frame. We will return to it a number of times during the week:

“The early Christian church conquered because the Christians of those days out-thought, out-lived, and out-died the pagans.”

Michael Green (1930-2019), notes that the first Christians were viewed as antisocial, atheistic and morally suspect, and that their message centred on a crucified Messiah, which was hardly an obvious strategy for cultural success. The American historian Larry Hurtado (1945-2019), similarly argues that early Christianity appeared strikingly different, even “odd or bizarre,” in its Roman setting. Similarly, the American Rodney Stark’s (1934-2022) work also underlines that Christian communities grew in part because, in

times of plague, fire, social fracture and insecurity, they became places of costly mutual aid and public compassion.

We are not seeking superiority to those who have gone before us. In our journey together, we must be careful not to aim for *superiority* to a previous generation, or even superiority to each other. As the Croatian Theologian, Miroslav Volf, (b1956), the director of the Centre for Faith and Culture at Yale University writes,

Striving for excellence means striving to become better in some regard, to improve, or at least not to get worse, especially as we age; it is striving to be better than myself. Striving for superiority, in contrast, is striving to be better than someone else, which can range from being better than my sibling, neighbour, or school friend to being better than anyone living, even to become the GOAT—the greatest of all time. As I understand them, these are two crucially different strivings.

Miroslav Volf,
The Cost of Ambition: How Striving to Be Better Than Others
Makes Us Worse, (Brazos Press, 2025)

We must approach the story of the early church with humility, not arrogance or pride, listening carefully to their story, naming their mistakes and their successes, and learning from both. Exploring the lessons they teach us will be challenging, inspiring and uncomfortable.

These early Christians had a passionate belief in the Resurrection of Jesus. As the British theologian and Pauline scholar, NT Wright (b1948) has written,

There is no form of early Christianity known to us- though there are some that have been invented by ingenious scholars- that does not affirm at its heart that after Jesus' shameful death God raised him to life again.

The American Baptist theologian, John Mark Terry (b1949), has written that:

We have the best materials, media, and methods, but we lack spiritual power. Christians of the apostolic era had none of our advantages; they didn't even have the New Testament. Still, they turned the Roman Empire upside down. What impact does your church have in your community?

Speaking of the early church, the American Presbyterian pastor-theologian, Timothy Keller (1950-2023), wrote:

The early church was strikingly different from the culture around it in this way - the pagan society was stingy with its money and promiscuous with its body. A pagan gave nobody their money and practically gave everybody their body. And the Christians came along and gave practically nobody their body and they gave practically everybody their money.

Michael Green, in his classic study *Evangelism in the Early Church*, argues that one of the great differences between the early Church and much of the modern Western Church is not simply strategy, courage or clarity, but *expectancy*. The early Christians *expected* the Spirit to bear witness to Jesus not only through words, but through

transformed lives, healings, deliverance, prophecy and spiritual power. He writes:

And it was the Spirit who gave his followers remarkable spiritual gifts. Prophecy, tongues (and interpretation), healing and exorcism were the most prominent in apostolic and subapostolic days alike. People did not merely hear the gospel: they saw it in action, and were moved to respond. The Western Church has grown too dependent on words, and not nearly dependent enough on the power of the Holy Spirit."

Michael Green,
Evangelism in the Early Church: Lessons from the First Christians
for the Church Today, rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003;
Eerdmans Michael Green Collection edition, 2023, Introduction to
the Revised Edition.

Across this week, I want to explore what we can learn from the early church by considering the following areas:

- **Monday** (tonight) - The Church that carried the Future: Acts and the distinctive marks of Kingdom People
- **Tuesday** - Jesus - The Kingdom at the Centre: The Church Begins Where Jesus Is Lord.
- **Wednesday** - Peter - Grace for the Broken Witness: Failure, Restoration and the Expanding Kingdom.
- **Thursday** - James - Kingdom Wisdom in a Divided Church: Holiness, Justice and the Faith That Becomes Visible.
- **Friday** - Paul - Mission at the Edge of the World: Grace, Conflict and the Unhindered Kingdom.

MONDAY NIGHT: The Church That Carried the Future

Acts and the Distinctive Marks of Kingdom People

Main Texts: Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 5:12-16; 6:1-7; 9:31; 11:19-26; 12:1-17; 13:1-3; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31

So we begin with a question that is both simple and unsettling: what made the New Testament Church distinctive? Not successful, impressive, relevant or admired. What made then distinctive? There is a difference.

A church can be successful without being distinctive. It can be busy without being faithful. A church can be admired by the surrounding culture because it has quietly stopped disturbing the surrounding culture. But the church in **Acts** was not admired or noticed because it fitted in. It was noticed because it bore witness to another King, another Kingdom and ultimately to another way of being human.

Luke begins **Acts** by telling us that the risen Jesus appeared to His disciples over forty days, *“speaking about the kingdom of God”* in **Acts 1:3**.

Acts is not simply the story of the early Church. It is the continuing story of the Kingdom of God through the risen and ascended Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Church is not the Kingdom. The Church witnesses to the Kingdom; serves the Kingdom and is a sign and foretaste of the Kingdom. But the Kingdom belongs to God, not to the Church.

That is why **Acts** ends as it begins. In **Acts 28**, Paul is in Rome, under guard, limited, watched, opposed, and yet in **Acts 8:31**, Luke says Paul is

“proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ unhindered.”

The last word in Acts is not prison, Rome, Caesar, or even Paul. The last note is **unhindered** - describing Paul's witness to Jesus and His Kingdom. The Greek word is ἀκωλύτως (*akōlutōs*) and it only appears here in the entire New Testament.

So what were the marks of this Church? Let me return to Luke's summary passages. They are not sentimental snapshots. They are theological portraits.

- **Acts 2:42-47** says the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.
- **Acts 4:32-37** tells us that the believers were of one heart and soul.
- **Acts 5:12-16** describes signs and wonders and public witness. Acts 6 tells us that the Church faced internal injustice and had to confront it.
- **Acts 9:31** says the Church lived “in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.”
- **Acts 13:1-3** shows us worship, fasting, prayer and missionary sending.

Although there are probably, many more, let me name five distinctive mark, which I referred to at the beginning of my message:

(1) Prayer Saturated

First, they were **prayer-saturated**.

Before Pentecost, they prayed. When threatened, they prayed. When Peter was imprisoned, the Church prayed. When leaders were sent out, they prayed and fasted. Prayer was not a programme. It was the atmosphere of the Church.

Acts does not explicitly mention prayer in every chapter, but prayer is so pervasive that every chapter either contains prayer, flows from prayer, recalls prayer, or shows the fruit of a praying, Spirit-led Church. One helpful summary says prayer is mentioned thirty-one times in twenty of Acts' twenty-eight chapters, and appears at nearly every major turning point in the narrative.

Acts	One-line prayer summary
1	The Church is born waiting, praying, and seeking God's guidance before it ever starts organising.
2	Pentecost turns the praying community into a Spirit-filled people devoted to "the prayers."
3	The first public miracle happens as Peter and John are going to the temple at the hour of prayer.

4	Threatened by authorities, the Church prays not for safety but for boldness, and the place is shaken.
5	The prayer-shaken community learns that holiness, fear of God, signs and witness belong together.
6	Prayer and the ministry of the Word are protected as the apostles refuse to let administration replace dependence.
7	Stephen dies praying, entrusting himself to Jesus and interceding for his killers.
8	Prayer accompanies the Gospel's crossing into Samaria, as the apostles pray for the Spirit to be received.
9	Saul's conversion is marked by prayer, while Peter prays before Dorcas is raised.
10	Cornelius prays, Peter prays, and the Gentile mission is opened through interlocking acts of prayer.
11	Peter explains the Gentile breakthrough by recalling the vision he received while praying.
12	While Peter is imprisoned, the Church prays earnestly, and heaven interrupts the locked room.
13	The missionary movement begins in worship, fasting and prayer, not strategy alone.
14	New churches are strengthened as elders are appointed with prayer and fasting.

15	The Jerusalem Council discerns the will of God in a prayer-shaped atmosphere of Scripture, testimony and the Spirit.
16	Europe's first recorded convert is found at a place of prayer, and prison praise becomes midnight intercession.
17	Paul's Athens witness flows from a life so God-attentive that even a pagan city becomes a summons to Gospel speech.
18	In Corinth, the Lord's night vision strengthens Paul, showing that mission depends on divine encouragement, not human nerve.
19	Ephesus reveals the collision between religious technique and true spiritual power, where the Word grows through reverent surrender.
20	Paul kneels and prays with the Ephesian elders, showing that apostolic leadership ends where it begins: in tears and prayer.
21	The journey to Jerusalem is soaked in farewell prayer, with disciples kneeling on the beach before Paul departs.
22	Paul's testimony turns on a temple prayer, where the Lord sends him far away to the Gentiles.
23	In the night, the Lord stands by Paul, the answer to the hidden dependence of a witness under threat.
24	Paul's defence before Felix is sustained by a conscience trained before God, the inward posture of prayerful accountability.

25	Before Festus and Agrippa, Paul's appeal to Caesar shows a life yielded to God's providential route to Rome.
26	Paul's testimony before Agrippa is evangelistic prayer in public form: he longs that all who hear him would become as he is in Christ.
27	In the storm, Paul gives thanks before all, turning a doomed ship into a table of trust.
28	On Malta, Paul prays and healing follows, and Acts closes with the Kingdom still being proclaimed unhindered.

The early Church did not pray because prayer was a respectable religious activity. They prayed because they knew they were out of their depth. Before the Church had buildings, budgets, status or strategy, it had knees bent, hands open, hearts surrendered, and the Spirit of God among them.

One of the reasons the modern Church often prays so little is that we have become too competent. We can organise without the Spirit, preach without trembling, sing without hunger, lead without dependence, and meet without expectation. But the Church in Acts knew that without God they had nothing.

(2) Spirit-following

Second, they were **Spirit-following**.

Acts is full of divine interruption. The Spirit falls in Jerusalem, then Samaria, then upon Cornelius' household. The Spirit says, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul." The Spirit prevents Paul from entering certain regions and redirects him toward Macedonia.

The first Christians did not possess the Spirit as a private blessing. They followed the Spirit as the presence of the risen Christ among them.

That is uncomfortable, because the Spirit cannot be managed. He can be obeyed, grieved, resisted, welcomed, followed, but not controlled. Acts is not primarily the record of the Church initiating mission, but of the Spirit moving first and the Church learning, sometimes slowly and painfully, to keep up. Greg Henson and David Williams in a Kairos University article titled "A Wild Goose Chase, Pt. 1: Keeping Up with the Work of the Spirit." Wrote:

"The Spirit is at work. The early church is just trying to keep up!"

In the same paragraph, they note that some scholars have suggested Acts could be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" or "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit," and they cite F. F. Bruce as saying of Acts that "in all the book there is nothing which is unrelated to the Holy Spirit."

- **Acts 16:6-10** - A closed door is not always opposition; sometimes it is guidance.

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- **Acts 2** - The first public act of the Church was not a strategy meeting, but an explanation of something the Spirit had already done.
- **Acts 4:23-31** - The Spirit does not remove the threat; He deepens the witness.
- **Acts 6:1ff** - The Spirit-filled Church is not proved by avoiding problems, but by facing them truthfully and redemptively.
- **Acts 7:54-8:4** - The Church thought it was being scattered by persecution; the Spirit was sowing it for mission.
- **Acts 8** - The Spirit crosses borders before the Church has rewritten its prejudices. The Spirit is not impressed by scale in the way we are; He will leave a crowd for one searching soul.
- **Acts 9:1-19** - Sometimes the Spirit's next great missionary is the person the Church is still afraid of.
- **Acts 10. NB v17, 44ff** - Cornelius needed conversion to Christ; Peter needed conversion from his narrowness.
- **Acts 13-15** - Spirit-led churches do not hoard their strongest people; they send them.
- **Acts 15** - The Spirit does not always avoid conflict; sometimes He uses conflict to rescue the Gospel from distortion.
- **Acts 16:11-40** - The Spirit's route into Europe runs through a prayer meeting, a deliverance, a beating, a prison and a household conversion.

- **Acts 19:1-20** - The Spirit will not allow the name of Jesus to be reduced to a formula.
- **Acts 20-28 Paul's journey to Rome** - The Spirit's guidance is not always away from suffering; sometimes it is straight into costly obedience. Acts ends with Paul chained, but the Gospel unhindered.

The Spirit filled them in **Acts 2**, and they had to explain Pentecost. The Spirit shook them in **Acts 4**, and they had to preach with boldness. The Spirit exposed injustice in **Acts 6**, and they had to reorganise. The Spirit scattered them in **Acts 8**, and they had to evangelise. The Spirit interrupted Peter in **Acts 10**, and he had to enter a Gentile home. The Spirit spoke in Antioch in **Acts 13**, and they had to send their best. The Spirit blocked Paul in **Acts 16**, and he had to cross into Macedonia. The Spirit warned Paul in **Acts 20** and **21**, and he had to suffer faithfully. The Spirit carried Paul to Rome in **Acts 28**, and the Kingdom was still proclaimed unhindered.

In **Acts**, the Spirit falls before the Church is ready, speaks before the Church has planned, sends before the Church has budgeted, interrupts before the Church has agreed, includes before the Church has adjusted, and leads before the Church has understood. The miracle of Acts is not that the Church was always brave, wise or prepared. The miracle is that the Spirit kept moving, and the Church kept learning to keep up.

(3) Word-Rooted

Third, they were **word-rooted**.

Acts 2 says they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Peter explains Pentecost through Joel and the Psalms. Stephen tells Israel's story from Abraham to Solomon. Paul reasons from the Scriptures in synagogues. The Bereans (**Acts 17**) examine the Scriptures daily.

The Spirit-filled Church was not anti-intellectual, anti-doctrinal, or anti-biblical. The Spirit drives the Church deeper into the Word.

A Church detached from Scripture may still be emotional, energetic, and even impressive. But it will *not* remain faithful.

(4) Mission-orientated

Fourth, they were **mission-orientated**.

Acts 1:8 is a map of obedience: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. The Gospel moves outward through preaching, persecution, hospitality, visions, arguments, imprisonment, shipwreck and ordinary conversation. The Church did not have a mission department. *The Church was a missionary people.*

(5) Jesus-centred

Fifth, they were **Jesus-centred**.

Peter preaches Jesus. Stephen dies seeing Jesus. Philip proclaims Jesus. Paul reasons about Jesus. The apostles heal in the name of Jesus. They suffer for the name of Jesus.

The early Church was not held together by personality, preference, ethnicity, nostalgia, or institutional instinct. It was held together by Christ.

The early church also got things wrong.

They mishandled money. Ananias and Sapphira lied. Greek-speaking widows were neglected. Peter had to be corrected. Paul and Barnabas split. Jewish and Gentile believers clashed. Leaders were imprisoned. Some churches tolerated false teaching. Some believers were afraid. Some were confused. Some were immature.

The New Testament refuses to airbrush the church. That should encourage us. The Church is not a society of the sorted. It is a community of the saved, who are still being sanctified.

The Holy Spirit did not wait for perfect people. He filled praying people. He corrected proud people. He sent wounded people. He restored failed people. He used conflicted people. So we must not say, "It was easier then." It was not.

The early Church faced religious hostility from synagogue authorities, political suspicion from Rome, economic vulnerability, imprisonment, public violence, internal ethnic tension, doctrinal confusion, poverty, famine, martyrdom, and social slander. Michael Green reminds us that the message of a crucified Messiah was culturally scandalous and intellectually laughable to many.

Larry Hurtado shows that early Christians looked strange in a world where religion was bound up with public ritual, civic loyalty and the worship of many gods. In his book, *Destroyer of the gods*, he argues that early Christianity appeared profoundly distinctive in

the Roman world: Christians rejected the traditional gods, formed a trans-ethnic identity, centred their life around sacred texts, and embraced a demanding moral vision that made them appear strange, even threatening, to their neighbours.² They were shaped by the Word of God. Despite the opposition they faced, **Acts** says the Word of God continued to increase. They overcame not by ease, but by faithfulness; prayer when threatened; through Scripture when confused; through the Spirit when redirected; through repentance when confronted; through generosity when poverty pressed in; through suffering when persecution intensified; and through public and open witness when silence would have been safer.

The quote from T. R. Glover that I used earlier said the early Christians “out-thought, out-lived, and out-died” their pagan neighbours. That is not triumphalism, it is costly distinctiveness.

- They out-thought because they saw the world through the resurrection of Jesus.
- They out-lived because they practised a different kind of community.
- They out-died because death had lost its final word.

And behind all of this was their expectation that Jesus would return. They did not believe history was drifting. They believed history had a destination. The ascended Jesus would come again

² Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

(Acts 1:11 and the words of the angels to the disciples make that clear).

This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

That expectation did not make them escapist, passive and speculative; it made them faithful, urgent and holy - eventually. They had to learn these character traits and how to walk in them, just as we do.

So tonight, as we begin, the question is not: can we recreate the first century? The question is: will we surrender again to the Lord of the Church? Will we become prayer-saturated rather than programme-dependent; Spirit-following rather than control-obsessed; Word-rooted rather than culture-shaped; Mission-orientated rather than self-protective; Jesus-centred rather than personality-driven?

The New Testament Church was not distinctive because it had everything right. It was distinctive because, again and again, it returned to Jesus. Perhaps that is where renewal begins. Not with novelty. Not with noise. Not with nostalgia. But with a people who say:

*Lord Jesus Christ,
Your Kingdom come.
Your will be done.
Fill us with Your Spirit.
Root us in Your Word.
Send us into Your world.
Keep us faithful until You come.*

May God help us to be such a people. Amen.

TUESDAY NIGHT

Jesus: The Kingdom at the Centre

The Church Begins Where Jesus Is Lord

Main Texts: Luke 4:16-21; Luke 6:20-49; Luke 9:18-27; Luke 10:1-24; Luke 12:35-40; Luke 17:20-37; Luke 22:24-27; Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:1-11

Last night we looked at The Church That Carried the Future and explored Acts and the Distinctive Marks of Kingdom People. We explored that the early Church was:

1. Prayer saturated
2. Spirit following
3. Word-rooted
4. Mission Orientated
5. Jesus Centred

If we want to understand the New Testament Church, we must begin not with Pentecost, not with Peter, not with Paul, not with James, and not even with Acts. We must begin with Jesus.

Christ is not the bringer of a new religion, but the bringer of life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (1906-1945)

The Church does not create its own identity. It receives its identity from Christ. We do not invent our own mission. We are sent by Christ. We do not define the Kingdom. We bears witness to the

Kingdom announced, embodied, inaugurated and promised by Jesus.

Luke 4:16-21

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Luke tells us that Jesus came to Nazareth, entered the synagogue, took the scroll of Isaiah and read from what we call **Isaiah 61**, and announced good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favour. Then He says (**v21**),

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

That is one of the most explosive sentences in the Bible. Jesus is not merely preaching about the Kingdom. The Kingdom is arriving in Him. The reign of God has stepped into history with a human face.

That is why we we read these words in **Matthew 3:2-3** concerning the core message of the ministry of John the Baptist:

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near

And as Jesus commences his own ministry, in **Matthew 4:17**:

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

John announces the Kingdom is near because his cousin, Jesus, is about to start his public ministry. Jesus announces that it is near because He is the King of the Kingdom, and He is standing in front of them. In other words, wherever Jesus is, His kingdom is present.

Consider **Matthew 2:2**, and the question posed by the Magi to King Herod:

Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?

The Danish theologian and philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1820-1855), offers the most astounding observation about this question. He notes that no-one is born a king. They are born princes and become kings. No-one, that is, *except* for Jesus, who has always been king.

What does Jesus show us about the Kingdom?

1. **Jesus makes clear that the Gospel is the Good News of God's intervention before it is Good Advice (Luke 4:16-21)**

First, the Kingdom is good news before it is good advice. Jesus does not begin by saying, “Do more to prove yourselves” He announces what God is doing.

*¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’*

Good news to the poor. Release to captives. Sight to the blind. Freedom for the oppressed. The Kingdom is God’s powerful, gracious and liberative intervention in the brokenness of the world.

Consider **Matthew 4:23-25; Matthew 9:35-37** etc. And then Jesus commands to his disciples in **Matthew 10**. His assurance in **Matthew 16**, and His instructions in **Matthew 28**. He tells us to do the very things that he had been doing - preach the kingdom, and demonstrate the kingdom through healing the sick, cleansing the leper, casting out demons and raising the dead. We are called to continue the ministry of Jesus, not to invent our own ministry for Jesus. We are to do what he did, nothing more and nothing less.

That is why the Church must be Jesus-centred. If we lose Jesus, we do not merely lose a doctrine. We lose the Gospel of the Kingdom - there is only one Gospel - it is the Gospel of the Kingdom.

2. Jesus teaches us that life as citizens of the Kingdom is both mercy and demand (Luke 6:17-29)

¹⁷ He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

*'Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*²¹ 'Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.*

*'Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

²² 'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

*²⁴ 'But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.*

*²⁵ 'Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.*

*'Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

²⁶ 'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

²⁷ 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your

shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³² 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

³⁷ 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'

³⁹ He also told them a parable: 'Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? ⁴⁰ A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. ⁴¹ Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴² Or how can you say to your neighbour, "Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye", when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.

⁴³ 'No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; ⁴⁴ for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵ The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the

evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

⁴⁶ ‘Why do you call me “Lord, Lord”, and do not do what I tell you? ⁴⁷ I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. ⁴⁸ That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. ⁴⁹ But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.’

Luke 6:17-49 gives us blessing and warning.

- The blessings of **vv20-23**.
- The woes of **vv24-26**.
- The responsiveness, rather than reactivity of **vv27-36**.
- The wise judgements and grace of **vv37-42**.
- The honest assessments of **vv43-49**.

Blessed are the poor. Woe to the rich. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Forgive. Give. Build your house on the rock by hearing and doing the words of Jesus. This is not soft take-it-or-leave-it religiosity. It is the deep ethics of the Kingdom. This is Luke’s version of the Sermon of the Mount, which is the great manifesto for the people of the kingdom. It is an invitation to the broken, a summons to the called, a painting of a deeper, more holy and more beautiful life, which is only available by the power of the

Holy Spirit. It is not an invitation to try harder, it is a call to sink deeper into the power of the Spirit and the grace of God. It is a call to surrender so that Christ can live in us and through us.

Jesus does not merely comfort the afflicted. He disturbs the comfortable. The early church were shaped by the character example and life of Jesus. We too often think, and sing of Gentle Jesus, meek and mild... We forget that the same Jesus said:

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force (Matthew 11:12, cf Luke 16:16

Think of **Matthew 23**; and of *the zeal of your house has consumed me (John 2:17; cf Psalm 69:9)*

3. Jesus teaches us that the Church much must be Cross-Shaped. (Luke 9:18-27)

¹⁸ Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?' ¹⁹ They answered, 'John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.' ²⁰ He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered, 'The Messiah of God.'

²¹ He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, ²² saying, 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.'

²³ Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who

lose their life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? ²⁶ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. ²⁷ But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.'

Because the Kingdom is cross-shaped, the Church must be cross-shaped. In **Luke 9**, Peter confesses Jesus as God's Messiah. Immediately Jesus speaks of suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. Then He says that anyone who wants to follow Him must deny themselves, take up the cross daily, and follow. Notice the word *daily*. The cross is not only the *means of our salvation*. It is the *shape of Christian discipleship*. The early Church did not invent sacrificial mission. It learned it from Jesus. The modern church often rejects the call to suffer or be identified with the Cross. We re-interpret it. We strip it of its power. We make it something less than it is - a symbol, a picture, or a metaphor. It is these things but only because it is *more* than these things: it is the radical call of God to walk in the way of sacrifice; to confront evil; to reject violence, even if it means that violence is used against us. We too often want that glory but not the cost. Many people want the ministry of Jesus in their churches, but not the life and journey of Jesus in their hearts.

"Hold everything in your hands lightly, otherwise it hurts when God pries your fingers open. But hold tightly to Jesus, who is the centre of it all."

Corrie ten Boom (1892-1982)

Dutch watchmaker and Christian survivor of the Concentration Camps and author of *The Hiding Place*.

Consider the connection between the call to carry a cross and the experience of transfiguration. We cannot have one without the other.

4. The Kingdom is Spirit-empowered (Luke 10:1-24)

If **Luke 4** says Jesus is anointed by the Spirit, **Luke 10** shows Jesus rejoicing in the Holy Spirit.

¹ After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ² He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. ³ Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴ Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵ Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" ⁶ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷ Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸ Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹ cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." ¹⁰ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ¹¹ "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near." ¹² I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

¹³ 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. ¹⁴ But at the judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for

you. ¹⁵ And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. ¹⁶ 'Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.'

¹⁷ The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' ¹⁸ He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. ¹⁹ See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. ²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

²¹ At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²² All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'

²³ Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! ²⁴ For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.'

Luke 24:44-49 tells the disciples to wait until they are clothed with power from on high.

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise

from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

As I reminded you last night, **Acts 1:1-11** (NB vv4, 8) says they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. The Spirit who anoints Jesus empowers the Church *to carry on His ministry...* So if the Church is to continue the work of Jesus, it must do so in the way of Jesus, by the power of the Spirit of Jesus.

"The Christian life is not an anxious effort to live the life of Christ, but the peaceful letting of Him live His life through us."

Evelyn Underhill (1875 -1941)

English Anglo-Catholic writer and pacifist

5. Jesus teaches us that our task and lives must be urgent because the King will return (Luke 12:35-40)

³⁵ *'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶ be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷ Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸ If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.*

³⁹ 'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

"Christ is the centre of our story, and everything else is just the background."

Elisabeth Elliot (1926 - 2015)

American missionary, author and speaker and widow to the Christian martyr, Jim Elliot.

Fifth, the Kingdom is **urgent because the King will return.**

Luke 12 tells servants to be dressed for action, ready for their master's return. **Luke 17:20-37** teaches that the coming of the Son of Man will expose the false securities of ordinary life.

²⁰ Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹ nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'

²² Then he said to the disciples, 'The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. ²³ They will say to you, "Look there!" or "Look here!" Do not go, do not set off in pursuit. ²⁴ For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. ²⁵ But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation. ²⁶ Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷ They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them. ²⁸ Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, ²⁹ but on the day that Lot

left Sodom, it rained fire and sulphur from heaven and destroyed all of them ³⁰ —it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. ³¹ On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away; and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back. ³² Remember Lot's wife. ³³ Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. ³⁴ I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. ³⁵ There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left.' [³⁶ Two will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left]. ³⁷ Then they asked him, 'Where, Lord?' He said to them, 'Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.'

Again, we are reminded that **Acts 1:11** says that Jesus, who has been taken up from them, will come in the same way as they saw Him go. The early Church lived between Ascension and Parousia. Peter uses the phrase *last days* in **Acts 2:17**, quoting **Joel 2:28-32**.

We see it in **Hebrews 1:1-3** We see a reference to the last days in **2 Timothy 3:1** We see another reference in **James 5:3**. Think of **1 Thessalonians 4**

We can endlessly debate whether they thought it was imminent, or they were filled with expectancy and hope (**Romans 15:13**). In one sense, I don't think that matters. What is clear is that their hope of the return of Christ shaped the way they lived, the way they saw the world and the events in the world, and the way they treated one another.

It created urgency and focus, not division and debate. We can turn the return of Jesus into either a timetable or a theory. Jesus turns it

into a summons. That is where we still live - between those two great moments of Ascension and Parousia....

Does this thrill us? Do we preach it? Do we believe it?

Be ready. Be faithful. Be awake. Be found serving.

The expectation of the imminent return of Jesus was not designed to make the Church strange in the wrong way. It was designed to make the Church holy, urgent, courageous and hopeful. The centre of our life must be Jesus Himself; unless He is the axis upon which everything turns, our perspective on the world will always be skewed. This is a sentiment that was strongly held by Amy Carmichael, whose life was surrendered to Christ.

"If I look at my own life or the lives of others through any medium but the cross of Christ, then I know nothing of Calvary love"

"If a sudden jar can cause me to speak an impatient, unloving word, then I know nothing of Calvary love. For a cup brimful of sweet water cannot spill even one drop of bitter water, however suddenly jolted."

Amy Carmichael (1857 - 1951)
Irish Missionary to India

6. The early followers of Jesus got a lot wrong too, just like us (Luke 22:24-27)

²⁴ A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵ But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶ But not so with you; rather the greatest among

you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷ *For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.*

Now, what did the followers of Jesus get wrong? Nearly everything at first. They misunderstood greatness. In **Luke 22:24-27**, at the table of the Lord, on the edge of the cross, the disciples argue about which of them is the greatest. That is terrifying. You can be close to holy things and still be full of *unholy* ambition.

They misunderstood power. James and John wanted fire from heaven in **Luke 9:46-48**.

⁴⁶ *An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest.* ⁴⁷ *But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side,* ⁴⁸ *and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.'*

They had enough theology to know God could judge, but not enough intimacy with Jesus to know what kind of spirit they were of. They misunderstood the Kingdom. In **Acts 1:6** they ask, "*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*" It is not a stupid question, but it is too small. Jesus does not deny the Kingdom. He enlarges their horizon. Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth.

They misunderstood suffering. Peter rebuked the way of the cross. The others fled from it. They misunderstood service. Jesus had to take a towel and redefine leadership. What did Jesus do with them? He *did not* discard them. He corrected them. He washed them. He

warned them. He restored them. He breathed peace over them. He sent them. That tells us something essential about the Kingdom: Jesus forms His witnesses through mercy and truth. There is a false mercy that never tells the truth. There is a false truth that has forgotten mercy.

Jesus gives both. The early Church learned its marks from Him.

"There is no drop of theological doctrine that does not find its centre in Christ."

John Calvin (1509 - 1564)

French theologian and reformer, whose ministry in Geneva was central to the developing Reformation

Prayer-saturated? Jesus prayed at His baptism, in the wilderness, before choosing the Twelve, on the mountain, in Gethsemane, and on the cross.

Spirit-following? Jesus was full of the Spirit, led by the Spirit, anointed by the Spirit.

Word-rooted? Jesus read Isaiah, resisted temptation with Scripture, taught from Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.

"The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid."

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

German theologian and reformer

Mission-orientated? Jesus said the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.

Jesus-centred? Of course. Because in Him all the promises of God find their yes.

"Jesus is the only key that unlocks the door to a true knowledge of God."

Timothy Keller:

Conclusion

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

C.S. Lewis, (1898-1963)

An Irish writer, apologist and Anglican theologian.

The closing line of an essay and lecture titled "Is Theology Poetry?" delivered to the Oxford Socratic Club in 1944.

But we must be careful here. To be Jesus-centred is not to use Jesus to endorse our preferences. It is to be brought under His lordship. A Jesus-centred Church must love the people Jesus loved. A Jesus-centred Church must confront the hypocrisy Jesus confronted. A Jesus-centred Church must welcome sinners without blessing sin. A Jesus-centred Church must serve, suffer, pray, forgive, witness, wait and hope.

Do you remember my quote from TR Glover last night - the early church outlived, out-thought and out-died the pagans. Do we do this?

So tonight I want to ask: what would it mean for us to begin again with Jesus? Not the Jesus of our preferences or our promise boxes. Not a domesticated Jesus, or the Jesus of our tribal loyalties. Not the Jesus who never contradicts us. Not the Jesus reduced to private spirituality.

But the Jesus of **Luke**. The Jesus who announces good news to the poor. The Jesus who calls fishermen and confronts Pharisees. The Jesus who eats with sinners and rebukes the proud. The Jesus who casts out demons and blesses children. The Jesus who sets His face toward Jerusalem. The Jesus who dies forgiving His enemies. The Jesus who rises with wounds. The Jesus who opens Scripture. The Jesus who pours out the Spirit. The Jesus who will come again.

If the Church is not centred on Him, it may still be religious, but it is not apostolic. If the Church is not shaped by Him, it may still be active, but it is not faithful. If the Church is not waiting for Him, it may still be busy, but it is not awake.

So perhaps our prayer tonight is simple:

Lord Jesus,

Bring us back to Yourself.

Not to an idea of Church.

Not to nostalgia for Acts.

Not to the fantasy of a problem-free community.

Bring us back to Yourself.

For You are the Kingdom in person.

You are the crucified King.

You are the risen Lord.

You are the coming Judge.

You are the centre.

And where You are truly central, the Church becomes distinctive again.

Amen.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT

Peter: Grace for the Broken Witness

Failure, Restoration and the Expanding Kingdom

Main Texts: Luke 5:1-11; Luke 22:31-34, 54-62; Luke 24:34; Acts 2:14-41; Acts 3:1-26; Acts 10:1-11:18; Acts 12:1-17; Galatians 2:11-14; 1 Peter 1:3-9; 1 Peter 2:9-12; 1 Peter 4:12-19; 1 Peter 5:1-4; 2 Peter 3:8-13

On Monday night we explored *Acts and the distinctive marks of the early church* and last night at keeping Jesus at the centre of the Kingdom and the Church because the Church is called to live under the lordship of Christ. We have reflected on five key marks of the early church:

1. Prayer-saturated
2. Spirit-following
3. Word-rooted
4. Mission-orientated
5. Jesus-centred

Tonight we look at Peter - courageous, headstrong, impulsive, flawed, called and used by God. He is not a perfect leader of the church - none of the early church leaders were perfect just as no church leader is perfect today.

John Chrysostom (d 407), the Archbishop of Constantinople, said this about Peter's prominence:

“What then saith the mouth of the apostles, Peter, the ever fervent, the leader of the apostolic choir? When all are asked, he answers.”

John Chrysostom, Homily 54 on Matthew

And we must begin here: Peter is not useful to us because he is impressive. Peter is useful to us because he is honest.

He is the disciple who speaks too soon, promises too much, understands too little, fails too publicly, weeps too bitterly, and yet is restored so deeply that his life becomes a witness to the mercy of Jesus.

I thank God for the story of Peter. I do not know a man in the Bible who gives us greater comfort. When we look at his character, so full of failures, and at what Christ made him by the power of the Holy Spirit, there is hope for every one of us.

Andrew Murray (1828-1917), Absolute Surrender, “Peter’s Repentance”

The New Testament does not give us leaders made of marble. It gives us leaders made of dust, filled with the Spirit.

Erasmus of Formia (also known as *St Elmo*) (d 303) referred to Peter as the ‘leader amongst the apostles’.

Chrysostom called Peter “the mouth of the apostles,” “the ever fervent,” and “the leader of the apostolic choir.” But Andrew Murray reminds us that Peter’s story comforts us precisely because his character was “so full of failures,” and yet Christ made him something new “by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Yet Erasmus described him as the leader amongst the Apostles. Peter matters: not because he never broke, but because in the hands of Jesus, even

a broken witness can become a shepherd of the Church. It was Peter who reminded leaders under his influencer , in **1 Peter 5:1ff**

¹ Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you ² to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. ³ Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. ⁵ In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’

⁶ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

His first appearance

Peter first appears in **Luke 5:1-11** as a tired fisherman.

¹ Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of

them and were washing their nets. ³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' ⁵ Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' ⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷ So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' ⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' ¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Jesus steps into his boat, teaches the crowd, and then tells him to put out into the deep water. Peter knows the lake. He knows the night has failed. Yet he says in v5

If you say so, I will let down the nets.

In his simple step of obedience, we find the beginning of discipleship. Not full understanding. Obedience to the word of Jesus. When the nets fill, Peter falls at Jesus' knees and says, as recorded in v8

Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.

What a strange prayer. Most of us say, "Come close, Lord, and make me feel better." Peter says, "Go away, because Your holiness

exposes me.” But Jesus does not go away. He says, as recorded in **v10**

Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.

That is grace. Jesus does not deny Peter’s sinfulness. He calls him anyway.

Now come with me to **Luke 22:31-34**:

³¹ ‘Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded[e] to sift all of you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.’ ³³ And he said to him, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!’ ³⁴ Jesus said, ‘I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.’

Peter says he is ready to go with Jesus to prison and death. Jesus says Peter will deny Him three times. Here Peter gets it wrong. He overestimates his courage and he underestimates his fear. He misunderstands himself and he thinks he is more faithful and more fearless than he actually is. None of us is safe when we think we know the full measure of our own strength.

Peter follows at a distance. He warms himself by the fire. He denies Jesus. The rooster crows. The Lord turns and looks at Peter. Peter goes out and weeps bitterly. There are moments in life when no one needs to explain our failure to us. We know. But Luke also reveals the merciful restoration of Peter. After the resurrection, in Luke 24:34 , the disciples say,

The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!

I love how Mark, Peter's scribe or amanuensis, puts it in **Mark 16:6-7**:

⁶ But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.

We are not told the details of the restoration moment. Perhaps some meetings between Jesus and the broken are too holy for the page. I am not sure any of us would want the full details of how Jesus has restored us published for all to know, read or see. But Peter is restored.

Then **Acts 2:14-41** comes. Peter's powerful message on the Day of Pentecost explaining what the Lord was doing.

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*¹⁷ "In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.*

*¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.*

*¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.*

*20 The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."*

*22 'You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of
Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power,
wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you
yourselves know — 23 this man, handed over to you according to the
definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by
the hands of those outside the law. 24 But God raised him up, having
freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in
its power. 25 For David says concerning him,
"I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
26 therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover, my flesh will live in hope.
27 For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.
28 You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence."*

*29 'Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor
David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to
this day. 30 Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with
an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his
throne. 31 Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the
Messiah, saying,
"He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption."*

*32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are
witnesses. 33 Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and
having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has*

poured out this that you both see and hear. ³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

“The Lord said to my Lord,

‘Sit at my right hand,

³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

³⁶ Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.’

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ ³⁸ Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.’ ⁴⁰ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ ⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

The same Peter who denied Jesus now stands in Jerusalem and proclaims Him. He does not preach himself. He does not explain away his failure. He announces Jesus: crucified, raised, exalted, Lord and Messiah.

What changed? Not Peter’s personality. The resurrection of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter shows us that the Church advances not through flawless leaders, but through forgiven witnesses who are empowered by the Spirit and rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

What marks do we see in Peter?

He is **word-rooted**. His Pentecost sermon is saturated with **Joel** and the **Psalms**. He does not explain the Spirit by abandoning Scripture. He explains the Spirit through Scripture.

He is **Jesus-centred**. At Pentecost, (**Acts 2**) at the temple gate (**Acts 3:1-26**), before the council, he keeps returning to Jesus.

- **Acts 3:6**
- **Acts 3:13ff**
- **Acts 3:17ff**
- **Acts 3:26**
- **Acts 4:1-4**
- **Acts 4:8ff**
- **Acts 4:13**
- **Acts 4:18ff**

He is **Spirit-following**. In **Acts 10:1-11, 18**, the Spirit forces Peter beyond his inherited boundaries. The sheet from heaven is not merely about food. It is about people. Peter must learn that God is not confined to Peter's categories.

Acts 10 is often described as Cornelius' conversion, but it is also Peter's conversion. As I said a few nights ago, Cornelius needs the Gospel but Peter needs his imagination converted, he needs his narrowness challenged. The Spirit says, "Go with them and do not make a distinction between them and us."

That is one of the great Kingdom moments in Acts.

A distinctive mark of the early church was that they understood that the Kingdom was not tribal property. It still is not. The Gospel is not ethnic privilege. The Spirit crosses thresholds that the Church would often prefer to keep locked. But Peter shows us that this was

not an instant moment. He went back and forwards on this. Peter gets it wrong and is worried, influenced or afraid of the wider leaders of the Church.

Galatians 2:11-14 tells us that in Antioch Peter drew back from table fellowship with Gentile believers when certain people came from James. Paul says he opposed Peter to his face.

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; ¹² for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. ¹³ And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'

This is raw and awkward. This is the Bible refusing to protect apostolic reputations at the expense of Gospel truth. Peter had preached grace to Gentiles in **Acts 10**, but later acted in a way that compromised that grace.

A person can have a breakthrough in one season and retreat in another. That is why we must never confuse past obedience with present faithfulness. The tension between Peter, James and Paul matters. It was not a personality squabble. It concerned the truth of the Gospel, the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers, and the concrete shape of table fellowship. The Holy Spirit used the tension. Through it, the Church was forced to clarify that Gentiles are not second-class members of the people of God. They are included by

grace through Christ. No circumcision, no ethnic boundary, no ceremonial badge can be added to the sufficiency of Jesus. That is how the Spirit often works. Not by avoiding conflict, but by bringing truth through it.

Peter in his letters

Now listen to Peter in his letters.

*¹ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,
To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia,
and Bithynia, ² who have been chosen and destined by God the Father
and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be
sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in
abundance.*

*³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his
great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through
the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an
inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in
heaven for you, ⁵ who are being protected by the power of God
through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In
this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer
various trials, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more
precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be
found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is
revealed. ⁸ Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even
though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with
an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the outcome
of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

In **1 Peter 1:1-9**, he writes to believers as exiles. He tells them they have been born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Later in the letter **1 Peter 2:9-12**, he says:

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

*¹⁰ Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.*

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. ¹² Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

He calls them a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. In **1 Peter 4:12-19**, we hear him say:

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief-maker. ¹⁶ Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name. ¹⁷ For the time has come for judgement to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And

*'If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinners?'*
¹⁹ *Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust
themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.*

He tells them not to be surprised by fiery trials. This is Peter, the man who once feared a servant girl, now teaching the Church how to suffer faithfully. Grace does not erase memory. It redeems it. Peter knows fear. So he can speak about courage. Peter knows shame. So he can speak about mercy. Peter knows collapse. So he can strengthen the brethren.

That is why his words about shepherding are so powerful - he understand the consequences of his weakness, and he is living proof of the faithfulness of God in the midst of our weakness.

In **2 Peter 3:8-18**, he addresses the apparent delay of Christ's return.

⁸ *But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.* ⁹ *The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.* ¹⁰ *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.*

¹¹ *Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness,* ¹² *waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire?* ¹³ *But, in accordance with his promise,*

we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him, ¹⁶ speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. ¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Some scoff. Some say, “Where is the promise of his coming?” Peter answers not with panic, but with patience. The Lord is not slow. The day of the Lord will come. Therefore, what sort of people ought we to be? That is apostolic eschatology. Not charts - character. Not speculation - holiness. Not escapism - faithful waiting.

Peter, James and Paul: Who they were, how they led, what their weakness was.

1. Peter was the bridge, James was the anchor, Paul was the frontier

Peter: the bridge-builder

Peter stands between worlds. He is thoroughly Jewish, deeply formed by Israel’s story, yet he is the one God uses to open the door

to the Gentiles through Cornelius. In Acts 10, Cornelius is praying, Peter is praying, and the Spirit brings them together. Peter has to learn, painfully and publicly, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Then, while Peter is still speaking, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word,” including Gentiles.

Peter’s gift: He can testify to what God has done.

Peter’s danger: He can retreat from what God has shown him.

James: the anchor

James is rooted in Jerusalem. He carries the weight of continuity, holiness, Scripture, and the Jewish identity of the early Church. At the Jerusalem Council, after Peter speaks and Paul and Barnabas testify, James interprets the Gentile mission in the light of the prophets and offers a judgement that preserves both Gentile inclusion and Jewish-Christian fellowship.

James’s gift: He stabilises the Church through Scripture, wisdom and moral seriousness.

James’s danger: His emphasis on holiness and continuity can be misused by others as pressure, boundary-policing, or suspicion of freedom.

Paul: the frontier

Paul is the apostle of the horizon. He has been entrusted with the Gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter has been entrusted with the Gospel to the circumcised. **Galatians 2** explicitly recognises these different spheres of calling, with James, Cephas and John giving Paul and Barnabas “the right hand of fellowship.”

Paul’s gift: He refuses to let the Church settle before the Gospel has reached the nations.

Paul’s danger: His intensity can create sharp confrontations and relational strain.

What we learn

The Church needs all three instincts:

- Peter's openness to surprise
- James's rootedness in holiness and Scripture
- Paul's missionary urgency

A healthy Church is not built by choosing one of them against the others. It is built as the Spirit holds together bridge, anchor and frontier.

2. Peter leads from testimony, James from wisdom, Paul from Gospel clarity

Peter: "This is what God did"

Peter's leadership is often testimonial. At the Jerusalem Council, he doesn't begin with a theory. He says God made a choice that through him the Gentiles should hear the Gospel, and that God gave them the Holy Spirit "just as he did to us." His argument is: *we must not deny what God has already done.*

Peter teaches us that leaders must pay attention to the evidence of grace.

James: "This is how Scripture helps us discern it"

James listens to Peter, Paul and Barnabas, but then says, "This agrees with the words of the prophets." He does not oppose experience, but he tests and frames it through Scripture. His leadership is discerning, pastoral and 'canonical'.

James teaches us that spiritual experience needs biblical interpretation.

Paul: “This is what the Gospel requires”

Paul’s leadership is sharply theological. In **Galatians 2**, he refuses to submit to those who would compromise the freedom believers have in Christ, “so that the truth of the gospel might always remain.” Later, when Peter withdraws from table fellowship with Gentiles, Paul confronts him because Peter and others are “not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel.”

Paul teaches us that behaviour can deny doctrine.

What we learn

These three leaders show three necessary questions for the Church:

- 1. Peter asks:** What is God doing?
- 2. James asks:** How does Scripture help us discern it?
- 3. Paul asks:** What does the Gospel demand of us now?

That is a powerful leadership triad.

- If we only ask Peter’s question, we may become naïve about experience.
- If we only ask James’s question, we may become slow to follow the Spirit’s new initiatives.
- If we only ask Paul’s question, we may become right but relationally bruising.

The Spirit uses all three.

3. Peter’s weakness was fear, James’s was caution, Paul’s was intensity

Peter: fear and inconsistency

Peter receives one of the greatest revelations in Acts through Cornelius. He sees the Spirit poured out on Gentiles. He defends Gentile inclusion. Yet in Antioch, according to Galatians 2, he withdraws from eating with Gentiles when certain people come from James. Paul says Peter “drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction.”

Peter’s failure is not doctrinal ignorance. It is fear-driven inconsistency.

Lesson: yesterday’s courage does not guarantee today’s faithfulness.

James: caution and the danger of being misrepresented

James’s caution is understandable. He leads the Jerusalem Church, where Jewish believers are zealous for the law and where Gentile inclusion threatens to fracture fellowship. In Acts 15 he gives a wise judgement, refusing to trouble Gentiles turning to God while asking them to abstain from practices that would make table fellowship with Jewish believers almost impossible.

But Galatians 2 shows that “certain people came from James,” and their arrival contributed to Peter’s withdrawal from Gentile table fellowship. The text does not say James personally ordered this, but it does show the power of a leader’s name and the danger of others weaponising a leader’s emphasis.

Lesson: leaders are responsible not only for what they say, but for the culture their emphases can create.

Paul: intensity and confrontation

Paul sees clearly that the Antioch issue is not merely social awkwardness. It is a Gospel crisis. If Jewish believers cannot eat with Gentile believers, then justification by faith and the one new

people of God are being contradicted in practice. So Paul confronts Peter publicly.

Paul is right to defend the Gospel. But the wider Pauline story also shows that strong conviction can come with intense conflict, as seen in his sharp disagreement with Barnabas over John Mark in Acts 15.

Lesson: courage for truth must be joined to humility, patience and love.

What we learn

The early Church was not led by flawless heroes.

- Peter needed courage.
- James needed openness.
- Paul needed tenderness.

And the miracle is that the Holy Spirit used all three.

- Peter opened doors he later struggled to walk through consistently.
- James held the centre when the Church might have splintered.
- Paul defended the Gospel when social pressure threatened to compromise it.

The lesson is not that we must imitate one and reject the others. The lesson is that the Church needs *Spirit-filled correction, Scripture-shaped discernment, and Gospel-centred courage*.

Peter teaches us that leaders must be open to the surprising work of the Spirit. James teaches us that leaders must root the Church in Scripture, holiness and wisdom. Paul teaches us that leaders must defend the truth of the Gospel, even when doing so is costly. But Peter also warns us about fear, James about caution, and Paul about

intensity. The early Church grew not because its leaders were flawless, but because the Holy Spirit was faithful.

Scripture, under the inspiration of the the Holy Spirit, does not flatten Peter, James and Paul into one kind of leader. The Spirit used their differences, exposed their weaknesses, corrected their failures, and through them taught the Church how to become truly 'catholic', truly holy, truly missionary, and truly centred on Jesus.

Conclusion

So what does Peter say to the Church today?

1. Do not hide your failures from Jesus. He already knows.
2. Do not let failure become your identity. Peter denied Jesus, but denial was not the last word over him.
3. Do not resist the Spirit when He expands your boundaries. The Spirit may send you to people you have avoided, misunderstood, feared, or judged.
4. Do not confuse orthodoxy spoken with orthodoxy lived. Peter believed the Gentiles were included, but in Antioch he failed to live consistently with that truth.
5. Do not lose hope when the return of Jesus seems delayed.

A lesson

The early Church needed Peter's weakness.

That sounds dangerous, but it is true. His weakness became a theatre for grace. His failure became a warning against pride. His restoration became a testimony to mercy. His correction became a guardrail for the Gospel. So let us beware of churches that need their leaders to look flawless. The New Testament knows nothing of that. It gives us Peter. Broken, restored, filled, corrected, used. And perhaps that is good news for some of us tonight. You are not disqualified because you have wept bitterly. You are not beyond use because you have failed publicly. You are not finished because fear once mastered you.

The question is not whether you have fallen. The question is whether you will return to Jesus. Because the risen Christ still restores broken witnesses. And the Spirit still fills people who know they are not enough.

Amen.

THURSDAY NIGHT

James: Kingdom Wisdom in a Divided Church

Holiness, Justice and the Faith That Becomes Visible

Main Texts: Luke 8:19-21; Acts 12:17; Acts 15:1-35; Acts 21:17-26; James 1:19-27; James 2:1-26; James 3:13-18; James 4:1-10; James 5:7-20

¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹ Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act — they will be blessed in their doing.

²⁶ If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James 1:19-27

Having explored lessons from Acts, Jesus, and Peter, tonight we turn to James. Remember the five distinctive marks we are considering:

1. Prayer-saturated
2. Spirit -following
3. Word-rooted
4. Mission-orientated
5. Jesus- centred.

Remember also that last night I offered you three roles - one for each of Peter, James and Paul:

- Peter the bridge-builder
- James the anchor
- Paul the frontier

And I offered you the three questions that we could imagine being asked - one by each of them, each one of them necessary questions for the Church:

1. Peter asks: What is God doing?
2. James asks: How does Scripture help us discern it?
3. Paul asks: What does the Gospel demand of us now?

That is a powerful leadership triad.

- If we only ask Peter's question, we may become naïve about experience.
- If we only ask James's question, we may become slow to follow the Spirit's new initiatives.
- If we only ask Paul's question, we may become right but relationally bruising.

The Spirit uses all three.

- Peter's weakness was fear.
- James' weakness was caution.
- Paul's weakness was intensity.

But these can also be strengths. Do you see that their leadership model, in isolation, is not enough. That is why I highlighted Jesus on Tuesday - He must be the Ultimate model for us. We follow and learn from the others as they follow Jesus.

James is a fascinating figure because he stands at the intersection of family, scepticism, leadership, holiness, controversy and unity. He is often overlooked when we consider the early church, but that is a significant mistake. According to Clement of Alexandria (147-215),

"Peter and James and John, after the Ascension of the Saviour... chose James the Just as bishop of Jerusalem."

Hegesippus (107-180) provides one of the earliest and most moving portraits of James:

"James, the brother of the Lord... was surnamed the Just by all."

He depicts James as a man of extraordinary holiness and intercession:

"He was often found upon his bended knees, interceding for the forgiveness of the people; so that his knees became as hard as camels' knees."

The Church Fathers remembered James not primarily as a theologian in an academy but as a righteous pastor on his knees.

For them, James was the living embodiment of his own letter: a man whose faith was made visible through prayer, holiness, wisdom, and works of mercy.

He was the brother of Jesus. During Jesus' earthly ministry, John tells us that His brothers did not believe in Him.

¹ After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him. ² Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near. ³ So his brothers said to him, 'Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; ⁴ for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.' ⁵ (For not even his brothers believed in him.) ⁶ Jesus said to them, 'My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. ⁷ The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil. ⁸ Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come.' ⁹ After saying this, he remained in Galilee.

John 7:1-9

¹⁹ Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. ²⁰ And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.' ²¹ But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.'

Luke 8:19-21

That is a sobering thing. You can live close to Jesus and still not recognise Him. But after the resurrection, James becomes a leader in the Jerusalem Church. Paul says in **1 Corinthians 15** that the risen Christ appeared to James.

⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Acts shows James as a central figure in Jerusalem.

*¹⁷ He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, 'Tell this to **James** and to the believers.' Then he left and went to another place.*

Acts 12:17

*¹ Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' ² And after **Paul** and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, **Paul** and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. ⁴ **When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.** ⁵ **But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'***

*⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, **Peter** stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them*

by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ **After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me.** ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

¹⁶ "After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will set it up,

¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord —
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.

Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸ known from long ago."

¹⁹ **Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,** ²⁰ **but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.** ²¹ **For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.'**

²² Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, ²³ with the

following letter: 'The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, ²⁵ we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ **For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials:** ²⁹ **that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.'**

³⁰ So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. ³² Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. ³³ After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them. ³⁴ but it seemed good to Silas to remain there ³⁵ but Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

Acts 15:1-35

¹⁷ When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us warmly. ¹⁸ **The next day Paul went with us to visit James; and all the elders were present.** ¹⁹ After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ When they heard it, they praised God. Then they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law. ²¹ They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise

their children or observe the customs. ²² What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³ So do what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. ²⁴ Join these men, go through the rite of purification with them, and pay for the shaving of their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself observe and guard the law. ²⁵ But as for the Gentiles who have become believers, we have sent a letter with our judgement that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.’ ²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having purified himself, he entered the temple with them, making public the completion of the days of purification when the sacrifice would be made for each of them.

Acts 21:17-26

Galatians speaks of him as one of the pillars.

*⁷ On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised ⁸ (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), ⁹ and when **James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.** ¹⁰ They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was[b] eager to do.*

Galatians 2:7-10

So James is a resurrection-shaped leader. He does not lead because he shared a house with Jesus. He leads because he has encountered the risen Lord. In Acts 15, the Church faces one of its greatest crises.

The question is simple, but explosive: must Gentile believers be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to belong fully to the people of God? This was not a minor administrative matter.

It was about the Gospel. It was about Scripture. It was about holiness. It was about unity. It was about the identity of the people of God.

Peter speaks.

Paul and Barnabas testify.

Then James responds.

¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

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¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been

strangled and from blood. ²¹ For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.'

²² Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, ²³ with the following letter: 'The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, ²⁵ we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.'

Acts 15:22-29

He appeals to Scripture, especially the prophetic promise that the nations will seek the Lord. He recognises that God is taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. James does two things at once.

- (1) He refuses to make Gentiles become Jews in order to belong.
- (2) He asks Gentile believers to live in ways that protect fellowship with Jewish believers and reject idolatrous practices.

James is not offering cheap compromise. He is practising Kingdom wisdom. He protects grace. He honours Scripture. He guards unity. He calls for holiness. That combination is rare - and it is as important now as it was then.

Some protect grace but forget holiness. Some defend holiness but crush grace. Some speak of unity but avoid truth. Some speak truth in ways that destroy unity. James shows us another way.

Now turn to the letter of **James**.

James is sometimes misunderstood as if he were opposed to Paul. He is not. Paul opposes works as the basis of justification. James opposes faith that remains theoretical, invisible and barren.

James asks: what kind of faith is real? As you heard from the reading from **James 1** at the beginning of my message,

²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

He stays with this theme across his letter.

¹ My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ² For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³ and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while

to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷ Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸ You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ⁹ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹ For the one who said, 'You shall not commit adultery', also said, 'You shall not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement.

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with

his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³ Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ **You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.** ²⁵ Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶ **For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.**

James 2:1-16

Faith that hears the Word and does nothing is self-deception. Faith that praises God and curses people made in God's image is contradiction. Faith that favours the rich and humiliates the poor is corruption. Faith that speaks of compassion but refuses practical mercy is dead. Faith without works is not immature faith. It is dead faith.

"Faith without works is not a false faith; it is a dead faith."

John Calvin (Commentary on James)

If Paul is the Apostle of the Horizon, then I think **James is the apostle of visible faith.**

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

James 3:13-18

¹ Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, 'God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us'? ⁶ But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'

⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

James 4:1-10

This matters because it is a distinctive mark of the early church - the Kingdom of God is not merely confessed. It is embodied.

"James is not opposed to faith; he is opposed to a faith that remains alone."

Douglas Moo (b1950)
(paraphrased summary of his theology of James)

Paul asks how a sinner is justified before God; James asks how a justified person lives before the world. James is the Sermon on the Mount translated into everyday Christian practice. If Romans teaches us how to enter the Kingdom, James teaches us how to live in it. James refuses to separate what God has joined together: faith in Christ and the imitation of Christ. The church's credibility is measured not merely by what it believes, but by how it lives. That is the enduring burden of James. In short, James calls believers beyond profession to demonstration, beyond orthodoxy to obedience, beyond hearing to doing, and beyond religious activity to Kingdom-shaped living.

What are the distinctive marks in James?

- He is **word-rooted**. “Be doers of the word,” he says. The Word is not simply to be studied. It is to be obeyed.
- He is **prayer-saturated**. James 5 calls the suffering to pray, the cheerful to sing praise, the sick to call for prayer, and the community to confess and intercede.
- He is **mission-orientated**, though not in the same language as Paul. For James, mission includes a community whose life makes the Gospel visible.
- He is **Spirit-shaped**, especially in his contrast between earthly wisdom and wisdom from above.
- He is **Jesus-centred**, not by constant repetition of the name of Jesus, but by echoing the teaching of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount breathes through James. I think his letter is the earliest

commentary we have on the Sermon on the Mount as he unpacks: mercy, integrity, speech, wealth, patience, hearing and doing.

Lessons from his mistakes

Now, what did James get wrong? We must tread carefully, but honestly. James appears associated with the Jerusalem Church's continuing concern for the law. That concern could be noble. It could preserve Jewish Christian identity. It could honour Scripture. But it could also create pressure on Gentiles and confusion about grace. In **Galatians 2:12**, according to Paul, Peter withdraws from Gentile table fellowship when "*certain people came from James.*" The text does not say James personally instructed them to undermine Gentile inclusion. But his name carried weight, and those associated with him contributed to a moment of Gospel compromise.

In **Acts 21**, James and the elders tell Paul that many Jewish believers are zealous for the law and that rumours have spread about Paul.

They propose a public act connected to purification. Again, this may have been pastoral wisdom. But it also shows the pressure James faced and perhaps the limits of his strategy.

Here is the rawness: even good leaders can create cultures where people misuse their emphasis.

- James emphasised holiness. Some turned it into boundary policing.
- Paul emphasised grace. Some accused him of lawlessness.

- Peter emphasised Gentile inclusion. Then fear made him retreat.

The Holy Spirit used the tension among these leaders to force the Church into deeper Gospel clarity.

That matters for us here and now because the early Church did not overcome tension by pretending it was not there. It prayerfully, Scripturally and painfully worked through it.

Acts 15:28 says, *“It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.”*

That phrase is astonishing. The Holy Spirit works through debate. The Holy Spirit works through testimony. The Holy Spirit works through Scripture. The Holy Spirit works through councils. The Holy Spirit works through people who do not yet fully understand one another.

Now listen to **James 5**.

⁷ Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹ Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

¹² Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

¹³ Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷ Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰ you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

James 5:7-20

“Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.” James, the practical apostle, the one who cares about speech, poverty, partiality, obedience and prayer, grounds everything in the coming of Jesus.

V9 - *The Judge is standing at the doors.* That is not a threat to terrify the faithful. It is a promise to steady them. The return of Jesus means injustice will not last forever. The return of Jesus means suffering is not meaningless. The return of Jesus means the rich oppressor will not have the final word. The return of Jesus means the Church can endure.

This is why early Christian hope was so powerful. It did not detach believers from the world. It enabled them to live faithfully in the world.

The anonymous Letter to Diognetus, preserved in early Christian tradition and often cited by historians, describes Christians as people who lived in their own countries but as sojourners, fulfilled their civic duties yet belonged ultimately elsewhere, and loved all though persecuted by all. That is profoundly Jacobean. Faith visible in ordinary life. Heaven-shaped citizenship on earth.

So what does James say to us tonight?

- He says: stop confusing hearing with obedience.
- He says: stop calling a meeting revival if the poor are still despised.
- He says: stop praising God with the same tongue you use to wound people.
- He says: stop calling dead orthodoxy faith.
- He says: stop building churches around the preferences of the wealthy.
- He says: stop asking for wisdom while nourishing ambition.
- He says: pray.
- He says: repent.
- He says: wait for the Lord.

The Church today often wants power without purity, growth without holiness, influence without obedience, and mission without repentance. James will not allow it. He asks us whether our faith has hands, feet, a tongue under discipline, a wallet under lordship, a heart free from partiality, and knees bent in prayer. That is not legalism. That is Kingdom integrity.

The New Testament Church was distinctive not only because it preached Christ, but because it learned to live under Christ. James reminds us that grace does not make holiness *optional*. Grace makes holiness *possible*.

So tonight, let us ask God for wisdom from above. Pure. Peaceable. Gentle. Willing to yield. Full of mercy and good fruits. Without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And let us ask for a faith that can be seen. Not performed. Seen. Not advertised. Embodied. Until the Lord comes.

Amen.

FRIDAY NIGHT

Paul: Mission at the Edge of the World

Grace, Conflict and the Unhindered Kingdom

Main Texts: Acts 9:1-31; Acts 13:1-3; Acts 16:6-10; Acts 17:16-34; Acts 20:17-38; Acts 28:23-31; Romans 15:14-24; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; 1 Corinthians 15:1-28; Galatians 2:11-21; Philippians 1:12-26; Colossians 1:15-23; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; 2 Timothy 4:6-8

Having looked at the lessons the early church teaches us from Acts, the Lord Jesus, Peter, and James, we end the week with Paul.

- **Acts** - We are Kingdom people in a waiting world
 - Prayer-saturated
 - Spirit-following
 - Word-rooted
 - Mission-orientated
 - Jesus-centred
- **Jesus:** The Kingdom at the Centre: *The Church Begins Where Jesus Is Lord*
- **Peter:** Grace for the Broken Witness: *Failure, Restoration and the Expanding Kingdom*
- **James:** Kingdom Wisdom in a Divided Church: *Holiness, Justice and the Faith That Becomes Visible*
- **Paul:** Mission at the Edge of the World: *Grace, Conflict and the Unhindered Kingdom*

Tonight, we must begin not with the missionary hero, but with the persecutor. **Acts 9** says Saul was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

¹ Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' ⁵ He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' ⁷ The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' ¹¹ The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' ¹³ But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' ¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and

said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' ²¹ All who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?' ²² Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

²³ After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

²⁶ When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. ³⁰ When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

³¹ Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Acts 9:1-31

That is violent language. Before Paul planted churches, he tried to destroy them. Before he preached grace, he needed grace. Before he suffered for Jesus, he made others suffer for Jesus. The Church must never domesticate Paul. His conversion is not the story of a religious man finding a better theological system. *It is the story of a violent enemy being conquered by the mercy of the risen Christ.*

On the Damascus road, Jesus says, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (**Acts 9:4**)

Notice that. Jesus does not say, “Why do you persecute my followers?” He says, “Why do you persecute me?” The risen Christ so identifies with His Church that to wound His people is to wound Him. Paul never recovered from grace. His whole theology is astonishment turned into proclamation. He was called and set apart.

¹ Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. ² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Acts 13:1-3

His life and ministry, his very purpose, was transformed. He lived for Christ, and Christ alone.

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

*'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'*

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

¹² I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; ¹⁴ and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

¹⁵ Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ¹⁶ These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defence of the gospel; ¹⁷ the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance. ²⁰ It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴ but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵ Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶ so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Philippians 1:12-26

John Chrysostom(349-407)

"The soul of Paul was the soul of the world."

"Paul was so great a man, and so abundantly inspired by the Spirit, that he surpassed all men of every age."

"Where the Church is, there is Paul; and where Paul is, there is the Church."

**Paraphrase drawn from repeated descriptions
of Paul's ministry and influence throughout his homilies.**

Theodoret of Cyrus (393-457)

"Paul became the teacher of the whole world."

(Commonly cited from Theodoret's commentaries on Paul's letters.)

John Calvin (1509-1564)

Calvin repeatedly described Paul as God's uniquely appointed apostle to the nations.

"He is a chosen vessel, appointed by the Lord for carrying the doctrine of salvation throughout the world."

Charles Hodge (1797-1878)

"Paul was not merely an apostle; he was the great theologian of the apostolic church."

Gordon D. Fee (b1934)

One of the most influential Pentecostal New Testament scholars of the last century.

"One reads Paul poorly who does not recognize that for him the presence of the Spirit, as an experienced and living reality, was the crucial matter for Christian life, from beginning to end."

"Paul can hardly help himself: his focus and concern are always on the people as a whole."

Fee argues throughout his work that Paul's Spirit theology is not peripheral but central to understanding the church and Christian existence.

Amos Yong (b1965)

A major Pentecostal theologian:

"Christian theology after the New Testament has in many ways been a continuing conversation with Paul."

This reflects a widespread Pentecostal recognition that Paul remains indispensable for ecclesiology, mission, and pneumatology.

Paul and the Kingdom

Now, what was Paul's understanding of the Kingdom and the distinctive that he carried?

Some people imagine Paul preached justification while Jesus preached the Kingdom. That is too shallow. Acts will not allow it.

²³ After they had fixed a day to meet him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. ²⁴ Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe. ²⁵ So they disagreed with each other; and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: 'The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,

*²⁶ “Go to this people and say,
You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.*

*²⁷ For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn —
and I would heal them.”*

*²⁸ Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been
sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.’ ²⁹ And when he had said these
words, the Jews departed, arguing vigorously among themselves*

*³⁰ He lived there for two whole years at his own expense and
welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ **proclaiming the kingdom of
God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all
boldness and without hindrance.***

Acts 28:23-31

Acts 28 says Paul spent his final Roman season “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.” The Kingdom and Jesus belong together. Paul’s Gospel declares that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has acted decisively to rescue sinners, create a new humanity, defeat the powers, pour out the Spirit, include the nations, and bring history toward the day when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. That is Kingdom theology. Not less than personal salvation. More. What marks do we see in Paul?

First, he is **Jesus-centred**.

Colossians 1 gives us one of the highest Christological visions in the New Testament.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him — ²³ provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

Colossians 1:15-23

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the one in whom all things hold together, the head of the body, the beginning, the firstborn from the dead. For Paul, Jesus is not part of the message. *Jesus is the message.*

Second, Paul is **word-rooted**.

He reasons from Scripture. He proclaims fulfilment. He reads Israel's story in light of Christ. He tells Timothy that Scripture is

God-breathed and useful for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness. (**2 Timothy 3:16**)

Paul does not abandon the Old Testament. He sees it fulfilled in Jesus.

Third, he is **Spirit-following**.

Acts 16 is deeply important.

⁶ They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸ so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Acts 16:6-10

Paul wants to go one way. The Spirit prevents him. He tries another direction. The Spirit does not permit it. Then comes the vision of the man of Macedonia. Mission is not simply strategic planning. It is obedience to the Spirit. That does not mean planning is wrong. Paul planned. But his plans were submitted to God.

Fourth, Paul is **mission-orientated**.

Romans 15 shows his desire to preach where Christ has not been named.

¹⁴ I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to

instruct one another. ¹⁵ Nevertheless, on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁷ In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. ¹⁸ For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, ¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ. ²⁰ Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, ²¹ but as it is written,

*'Those who have never been told of him shall see,
and those who have never heard of him shall understand.'*

²² This is the reason that I have so often been hindered from coming to you. ²³ But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you ²⁴ when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while.

Romans 15:14-24

Acts 17 shows him in Athens, reasoning in synagogue and marketplace.

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what

this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, ²⁹ Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

³² When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ ³³ At that point Paul left them. ³⁴ But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Acts 17:16-34

Acts 20 shows him with tears, humility and perseverance.

¹⁷ From Miletus he sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to meet him. ¹⁸ When they came to him, he said to them: 'You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. ²⁰ I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, ²¹ as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus. ²² And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. ²⁴ But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.

²⁵ 'And now I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, will ever see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. ²⁹ I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. ³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴ You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. ³⁵ In all this I have given you an

example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive.""

³⁶ When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed. ³⁷ There was much weeping among them all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again. Then they brought him to the ship.

Acts 20:17-38

Paul's mission was intellectual, pastoral, spiritual, relational and costly. Michael Green points out that the early Christian message seemed deeply unpromising in its world because it proclaimed a crucified criminal as Lord. Yet Paul says the word of the cross is the power of God.

Fifth, Paul is **prayer-saturated**.

Read his letters. He gives thanks. He intercedes. He asks for prayer. He prays for wisdom, revelation, strength, love, holiness and endurance. Paul's theology kneels. Now, what did Paul get wrong?

Again, we must be careful and honest. Paul was not sinless. He says he was chief among sinners (**1 Timothy 1:15**). He grieved over his former violence (**Galatians 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9**). He carried weakness. He speaks of anguish, tears, sleeplessness, pressure, anxiety for the churches. (**2 Cor 4, 11, 12**)

In **Acts 15:36-41**, Paul and Barnabas have a sharp disagreement over John Mark. The disagreement is so severe that they part company. That is painful. Two Spirit-filled leaders, both used by God, cannot agree on the way forward. Who was right? Perhaps Paul was right

about the demands of mission. Perhaps Barnabas was right about the possibility of restoration. Perhaps both saw something true and both failed to hold it together. Paul refers positively to Mark both earlier and later (**Colossians 4:10**, **Philemon 1:24**, and **2 Timothy 4:11**), which suggests that grace had the last word.

The New Testament does not hide relational fracture. It shows us that mission sometimes advances through wounded people who must later learn reconciliation. Then there is Paul's confrontation with Peter in **Galatians 2**.

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; ¹² for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. ¹³ And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'

¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ,[f] and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. ¹⁷ But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; ²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by

faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Galatians 2:11-21

Peter withdraws from Gentile fellowship. Paul opposes him publicly because the truth of the Gospel is at stake. This is not Paul being argumentative for sport. This is Paul recognising that behaviour can deny doctrine. If Jewish and Gentile believers cannot eat together, then the one new humanity in Christ is being contradicted. Here is the tension among Peter, James and Paul.

- Peter knows Gentiles are included, but fear makes him inconsistent.
- James guards holiness and unity, but those associated with him intensify pressure.
- Paul defends grace fiercely, but his own relationships can fracture.

The Holy Spirit uses all of them. Peter opens the door to Cornelius. James helps the Jerusalem Council discern a way forward. Paul carries the Gospel across the Roman world and articulates its implications with blazing clarity. Their weaknesses do not cancel their callings. Their tensions become instruments of clarification. Their failures become warnings to the Church. Now we must ask: was it easier then?

No.

Paul's world was not waiting gratefully for the Gospel. He was beaten, imprisoned, mocked, stoned, slandered, shipwrecked and opposed. Churches were fragile. Converts came from idolatry, immorality, Judaism, paganism, slavery, wealth, poverty and philosophical confusion. There were no church buildings, no legal protections, no Christianised calendar, no printing press, no broadcasting technology, no social respectability.

Rodney Stark has argued that early Christian growth happened among communities facing instability, epidemics and urban hardship, where Christian mutual aid and care were socially significant. The Princeton University Press summary of Stark's work notes that Christians formed *strongholds of mutual aid amid disasters* and that *voluntary martyrdom strengthened communal commitment*.

So let us stop saying it is harder now. It may be different now. It may be more secular now in the West. It may be more distracted now. It may be more suspicious now. But harder? The first Christians might ask us to think again. They had Caesar. We have algorithms. They had prison. We have indifference. They had mobs. We have mockery. They had no cultural permission. We have more freedom than many of them ever knew. The issue is not whether the Gospel can advance. The issue is whether we believe it is still the power of God and we will be faithful to it. Paul believed it was the power of God unto salvation, and he was faithful to it to the end.

In **1 Thessalonians**, he describes believers who turned from idols to serve a living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven.

² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹ For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

There it is again. Conversion, service, waiting. The return of Jesus shaped everything.

In **1 Thessalonians 4 and 5**, Paul comforts grieving believers with the coming of the Lord.

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound

of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

^{5:1} Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴ But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷ for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

In 1 Corinthians 15, he says Christ's resurrection is the first fruits, and then comes the end.

¹ Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ² through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them — though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ — whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷ If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹ For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²² for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom

to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For 'God has put all things in subjection under his feet.' But when it says, 'All things are put in subjection', it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

1 Corinthians 15:1-28

In **Philippians 3:20**, he says our citizenship is in heaven, from where we are expecting a Saviour. In **2 Timothy 4**, he speaks of the crown of righteousness reserved for all who have longed for Christ's appearing.

⁶ As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

2 Timothy 4:6-8

Paul's eschatology was not decorative. It shaped suffering, mission, ethics, grief, courage and worship. The Church today needs that horizon again. Without the return of Jesus, we become managers of decline or curators of religious memory. With the return of Jesus, we become witnesses of the coming Kingdom.

So as we close this week, what have we seen?

- Jesus gives the Kingdom its centre.
- Peter shows that failure can be restored.
- James shows that faith must become visible.
- Paul shows that grace sends us to the ends of the earth.
- Acts shows that the Church is most distinctive when it is prayer-saturated, Spirit-following, word-rooted, mission-orientated and Jesus-centred. And these 'marks' are seen in the lives of all whom we have considered.

Learning when to let others lead

James and his leadership.

Peter and his leadership.

Paul and his leadership.

They all help is to understand when we need to step out of the way. James leads the Jerusalem church faithfully. Peter does not so much formally resign as narratively recede. In Luke's telling, the centre of gravity shifts gradually from Peter and Jerusalem to Paul and the Gentile mission, with the decisive literary transition happening across **Acts 12–13**, and the final public handover of narrative prominence coming in **Acts 15**. Peter is the dominant apostolic voice in **Acts 1–12**. Paul becomes the dominant missionary voice from **Acts 13** onward.

The Transition has three stages:

1. **Acts 1–12:** Peter is the leading public apostolic figure.
2. **Acts 13–14:** Paul emerges as the main missionary voice.
3. **Acts 15:** Peter speaks for the last time in Acts, James presides in Jerusalem, and Paul's Gentile mission becomes the main narrative line thereafter.

1. Acts 1–12: Peter is the leading apostolic voice

In the first half of Acts, Peter is central.

- He leads the replacement of Judas in **Acts 1**.
- He preaches at Pentecost in **Acts 2**.
- He heals the lame man and preaches in **Acts 3**.
- He answers the authorities in **Acts 4**.
- He confronts Ananias and Sapphira in **Acts 5**.
- He is involved in the Samaritan breakthrough in **Acts 8**.
- He ministers to Aeneas and Dorcas in **Acts 9**.
- He opens the Gentile door through Cornelius in **Acts 10**.
- He explains and defends that Gentile breakthrough in **Acts 11**.
- He is imprisoned and miraculously released in **Acts 12**.

So Peter is the great Jerusalem-apostolic witness of the first movement of Acts. Peter carries the keys in the first movement of Acts: he opens the door in Jerusalem, Samaria, and then to the Gentiles. That is especially clear in **Acts 10**, where Peter is praying, receives the rooftop vision, goes to Cornelius, and sees the Holy Spirit fall on Gentiles while he is still speaking.

2. Acts 12 is the hinge: Peter exits the centre

Acts 12 is a turning point. Peter is imprisoned, the Church prays, he is released, and then the striking line comes:

“Then he left and went to another place.” Acts 12:17, NRSVA

That is almost Luke’s narrative farewell to Peter as the central actor.

He does appear again in **Acts 15**, but after **Acts 12** he no longer drives the story. The camera moves away from Jerusalem and Peter, and toward Antioch, Barnabas, Saul/Paul, and the wider Gentile mission.

Immediately after Peter’s release and Herod’s death, **Acts 13** opens in Antioch, where the Holy Spirit says:

“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

The Church fasts, prays, lays hands on them, and sends them. Acts then says they are “sent out by the Holy Spirit.” That is the moment where Luke’s missionary focus decisively shifts.

Acts 12 is where Peter recedes; **Acts 13** is where Paul emerges.

3. Acts 13: Paul becomes the main missionary voice

At the beginning of **Acts 13**, the order is still “Barnabas and Saul.” But during the Cyprus mission, Saul is also called Paul, and from that point the narrative increasingly places Paul at the front. In **Acts 13**, Paul confronts Elymas, preaches in Pisidian Antioch, and begins

to function as the chief public interpreter of the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles beyond Palestine.

From **Acts 13** onward, Paul is the main travelling preacher, apologist, sufferer, church planter and theological voice in the narrative.

Peter is the leading witness of the Gospel's breakthrough from Jerusalem; Paul is the leading witness of the Gospel's movement to the nations.

4. Acts 15: Peter's final speech, James's Jerusalem leadership, Paul's mission confirmed

Acts 15 is crucial because all three figures appear in relation to the Gentile question. Peter speaks first, reminding the council that God chose him so that the Gentiles would hear the Gospel and believe. He says God gave them the Holy Spirit "*just as he did to us*" and "*made no distinction between them and us.*" Then Barnabas and Paul testify about "*the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.*" Then James gives the concluding judgement, grounding the decision in Scripture and saying, "*I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God.*"

So **Acts 15** shows three things:

- *Peter* is still honoured as the one through whom the Gentile door first opened.

- *James* is now the recognised stabilising leader in Jerusalem.
- *Paul* is confirmed as the apostolic missionary to the Gentiles.

After **Acts 15**, Peter disappears from Acts altogether. Paul dominates **Acts 16–28**.

Peter does not vanish because he has failed, nor does Paul replace him because Peter is irrelevant. Rather, Luke shows the Gospel moving according to **Acts 1:8**. Peter leads the witness in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and opens the door to the Gentiles. Then, once that door is open, Paul carries the Gospel across the Roman world. **Acts 12** is the hinge, **Acts 13** is the launch, and **Acts 15** is the public confirmation.

In **Acts 1–12**, Peter is the chief voice of apostolic witness.

In **Acts 13–28**, Paul becomes the chief voice of missionary advance.

Acts 15 is the bridge between them, where Peter testifies, James discerns, and Paul is released into the future of the Gentile mission.

Peter opens the door; James guards the centre; Paul carries the Gospel through the door to the nations. We still need people to open doors, people to guard the centre and people to carry the Gospel to the nations. History reminds us that this Church did not flourish because circumstances were favourable. It flourished because the risen Jesus was present among His people by the Spirit. As I have said several times, T. R. Glover said the early church out-thought, out-lived and out-died the pagans. Let me put that before us as a final challenge.

Can we out-think our age? Not by cleverness, but by seeing reality through Christ.

Can we out-live our age? Not by moral superiority, but by holiness, mercy, justice, prayer and love.

Can we out-die our age? Not by seeking suffering, but by refusing to let death, fear, loss or reputation have the final word.

The Kingdom of God has come in Jesus. The Kingdom of God is advancing by the Spirit. The Kingdom of God will be revealed when Christ returns. Until then, the Church has work to do.

- Pray.
- Follow the Spirit.
- Open the Scriptures.
- Go to the world.
- Keep Jesus at the centre.

And wait with hope. The last word of **Acts** is not chains. It is unhindered. May that be true of us.

Amen.

[ends]

MJD

Buckie, August 2026

