

# The Church



# Better Together

*So far in our 21 Days of Prayer, we have seen the church become a functioning body through the power of the Holy Spirit and the fellowship of like-minded believers. This week we will watch as they wrestle with issues that arise and as they are grown and stretched in their faith. The church will faithfully serve, earnestly teach and make inroads into their culture. Even in the face of opposition, Christ's Great Commission will begin to be fulfilled. We can glean much insight as we follow their journey.*

*"...by love serve one another." Galatians 5:13b*



## Monday, September 1—*A New Normal*

**Before you begin read:** Acts 8:1-4, 25-40 with 2 Tim 3:14-17

**Focal Passage:** All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for doctrine, for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:16-17

**For thought:** Do you ever feel inadequate for entering a spiritual conversation or an area of ministry? On what do you base this opinion?

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In this season of the early church, post resurrection, they had enjoyed remarkable works of the Apostles and movements of the Holy Spirit. It was a unique time in the faith, and it might have been nice to sit back and enjoy it. They were having prayer and fellowship, meeting needs and learning to adapt to the new reality of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It was still very fluid; they had never done it this way before. The Spirit, in this time, came initially through the acts of the Apostles. This ensured that the movements were valid and legitimate since Satan often tries to produce a counterfeit to any genuine move of God. The persecution from Saul after Stephen’s stoning caused a diaspora, the movement out of Jerusalem and Judea. This scattering was also a move of the Holy Spirit for the fulfilling of Jesus’s Great Commission to go into all the world, to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost. When the Holy Spirit moves in the life of a Christian, there can be tension between moving forward with Him, and staying with the norm, with what is comfortable. They had to navigate being a minority without their support structure of the fellowship of the church, however they did not go alone. This wonderful new Holy Spirit, helper, teacher, comforter, was the actual presence of God, as Jesus had said He would be. He was with them, in them and was leading them. In Acts Chapter 8, Philip had traveled into Samaria and was seeing a phenomenal move of the Spirit with many being saved. It would have been logical to stay, and it might have been tempting to stay, but the Holy Spirit had an appointment for him on the road to Gaza. There he encountered the Ethiopian man, and the Spirit urged him to engage. This was perhaps uncharted territory for Philip. We do not know if he still had the ability

to speak in a foreign language, or if the Ethiopian was bi-lingual, but Philip had been with Jesus, he had studied the scriptures, he was thoroughly equipped. He stepped into the chariot and explained from the scriptures, the gospel. Philip did everything he could, and the Holy Spirit did the rest. By the time they came upon water, the Ethiopian was ready to receive Christ and be baptized. Again, it might have been nice to enjoy the moment, but the Holy Spirit snatched Philip away to Azotus, where he continued in the work. Just a momentary mission, but full of power and purpose; this Ethiopian may have been the first witness of the Gospel to Africa! As believers, we have that same Spirit, and He will do everything we need Him to do. If we do our part, He will do the rest. He causes the scriptures to resonate with us, He impresses our spirits of the Lord’s leading “And your ears will hear a word saying, ‘this is the way, walk in it whenever you turn to the right or to the left.’” (Is. 30:21) Let’s walk in the scriptures daily, pray consistently, take advantage of training opportunities and be ready. Let’s do our part and watch Him do His, then we will experience the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit like never before.

**Apply:** If you do not feel fully equipped for God’s call on your life, what would you need to change this week in order to correct that?

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Ask the Lord to fill you with His Spirit, to open up your heart to understand the scriptures and to let you hear His Spirit say, “this is the way, walk in it.”

**Praying God’s Word:** Father we know that you long to be gracious to us that You wait on high to have compassion (Is 30:18). You are patient and kind (1 Cor 13:4). Forgive us, Dear Lord, when we have gone astray, turning to our own way (Is 53:6). Restore to us the joy of our salvation and renew a steadfast spirit in us (Ps. 51:12). We know You see our busy attempts to serve, but the sacrifice You want is a broken and contrite heart! (Ps. 51:17). We want to know You, we want to hear You, to bear Spiritual fruit. We want to feel Your pleasure (Col. 1:10). Ask the Lord.

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## Tuesday, September 2—*A Way in the Wilderness*

**Before you begin read:** Acts 9:1-21 with Isaiah 43:18-19 and Jeremiah 1:5

**Focal passage:** “Behold, I will do something new, now it will spring forth. Will you not be aware of it? I will even make a roadway in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.” Isaiah 43:19

**For thought:** What does it bring to your mind when you realize God has thought of you and planned for you before you were born?

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The conversion of Saul is such a pivotal point in the life of the church that it would be short-sighted to study the church without reading his story. He had it all, it seems from a secular perspective. Raised in the right family, tutored by the best, a Pharisee of Pharisees, by his own admission. He had watched as Stephen was stoned for his unrelenting defense of Jesus the Messiah. He was revered among the temple leadership and Saul commanded such respect in the public square, he had the power to hunt people down and imprison them. It was in that capacity that we find him on the desert road to Damascus. The story is one of the most well-known in all of scripture. The desert road, the blinding light, the voice from heaven, and Saul was led by his comrades to Damascus. One might say Saul found himself in quite a dilemma. He needed spiritual counsel about Jesus of Nazareth, and he had no friends who were believers or if he did, they were all in jail! God, however, came to the persecutor’s aid and dispatched the somewhat hesitant Ananias. Since Saul fell blind on the way to Damascus, Ananias was still a free man, and Ananias was obedient to the Lord. He had insider knowledge of the biggest news since the resurrection; God had a plan for Saul of Tarsus, a plan for good and not for harm, to give him a hope and a future. Saul was converted and baptized. Like all Messianic Jews, Saul now had the best of both worlds. He had the heritage, the history, and now he had the Messiah. All the knowledge of the scriptures he had painstakingly memorized as a boy and young man, now became so clear. We are not given a lot of information about what Saul may have been thinking as he fasted for

those days. He could have contemplated Old Testament scripture like God’s words to the prophet Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart and appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Perhaps Isaiah 43 came to mind, “Do not call to mind the former things, or ponder the things of the past. Behold I will do something new, now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of it? I will even make a roadway in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.” How like God to literally meet Saul on a roadway in the wilderness and bring to him rivers of living water in the desert. The Good News is that God does this in the life of anyone who will seek His face and repent of their sin. We may still face consequences and reminders of our past, but they do not have to define us. Remember, the scripture tells us, “If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.”

**Apply:** Is there anything from the past that you have difficulty letting go of? God is more interested in you considering your future with Him than your past. Reread Isaiah 43:18-19 and believe God to be true to His word. Lay your burden down and move on with Him.

**Praying the scriptures:** Dear Jesus, where can we go but to You? You alone have the words of life (John 6:68). You give us beauty from ashes, gladness from mourning, praise from despair. Lord, make us like oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of Your splendor! (Is. 61:3). Then You can rebuild our ruins and restore our past devastations, to live redeemed lives by Your grace (Is. 61:4). Respond to what the Lord is saying to you.

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Wednesday, September 3—*Born to Serve*

Before you begin read: 1 Peter 4:10-11 with Matthew 20:25-28, Luke 10:38-42, Galatians 5:13b

Focal passage: "...whoever serves let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ..." 1 Peter 4:11b

For thought: What are some reasons you might agree to serve in your church?

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There will always be opportunities to serve in the church, and those of us who know the Lord have a desire to serve. But too many times, those who are willing are tapped repeatedly to fill multiple positions, while others have no area of service at all. Is this Jesus’s intention? What is the Biblical perspective of serving? What is our service supposed to produce for God, for us and for others? The whole of the Christian life is built on putting ourselves last and other’s need above our own. In serving we put our time and agenda aside for the purpose of providing for another; in this way we pattern the example that Jesus lived out for us. He came for the express purpose of giving His life away. The scripture also tells us that God loves a cheerful giver, and so when we serve out of love for Him and with joy in meeting a need, we are pleasing to Him. It brings honor to Him in heavenlies. The hosts of heaven must say, “Look how they serve Him, He is worthy of all praise!” When we consider Jesus’s response to Martha, He did not deny that there was a need for serving. He did not say Martha did not need help. What He did say was that there has to be a priority in seeking Him over the needs of the day. Mary had chosen to make Him her first choice. Martha had so much she wanted to do for Him, that she failed to just sit with Him for a while. Biblical, spiritual service is fueled by our love for God, by the strength and enabling that He provides, and from the overflow of our deep and abiding relationship with Him. If we are lacking in any of these areas, we may find ourselves like Martha, feeling overwhelmed, unappreciated, resentful, exhausted or complaining. When we begin to see any of these symptoms in our

serving, we should reassess our commitments. It may be helpful to ask these questions about each responsibility we have taken on.

- 1. Am I doing this job out of my love for Him or because I think nobody else would?
- 2. Am I aware that His strength is necessary for me to do this task, or am I just determined to get it done?
- 3. Am I in God’s Word consistently so that I am being filled by His Spirit and have extra to pour into His work or am I running on empty most of the time?
- 4. Do I feel His pleasure, or do I just feel guilty if I say “no”?

There will always be needs and opportunities to serve, and God designed the church body to have all the parts it needs to function well. If you have not found a place of service, begin to pray that the Lord would show you your place. Take the opportunity to participate in one-time events to gain experience and explore how your gifts can be used. God does not usually place you in a role that you are not equipped for or that you have no enjoyment of. Then check every opportunity that comes along by the four questions above. In Biblical, spiritual service you will find much joy and purpose for His kingdom and His glory.

Praying God’s Word: Father, you are worthy of much more than you receive. Helps us to be ready to let our lives be poured out as an offering to you (2 Tim. 4:6). Give us guidance in what we pursue, so we may know that You are in our decisions (Is. 30:21). Pour out Your Spirit into our lives so that we may pour into others (Acts 2:17). For Your glory, we pray. Amen! Pray now for His leading.

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## Thursday, September 4—*Coming Full Circle*

**Before you begin read: Acts 9:19-31 with Phil 3:7-14**

**Focal Passage:** “Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.” Phil 3:12

**For thought:** Have you ever felt the regret of being responsible for causing a problem? Were you able to resolve the matter? How do you view the incident now?

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In the conversion of Saul there was a whirlwind of activity both spiritual and physical. Jesus spoke, Saul responded, Saul’s companions saw their fearless leader being led by the hand, Ananias was called to do the worst job he could imagine. The story did not end there, however, it was just beginning. The converted Saul soon began frequenting the synagogue where he astounded the disciples of Damascus with his grasp of the Gospel. When a person is saved, all their past sin is wiped away, but they still carry their past knowledge of the scriptures, they still have their experience. They don’t lose their talents and skills, and Saul had all of these. It is not hard to imagine that the believers there were somewhat leery. After all, this was Saul the persecutor, whose purpose in coming there was to take Jesus’s followers to jail, and yet, Saul was growing stronger in the faith with each passing day as he confounded the unbelieving Jews in the synagogue. He could offer proof both from the scripture and from his recent experience, that Jesus was the Christ. Unbelievers may argue religion, and while they may not choose to believe, it is difficult for them to discredit the scripture and personal testimony of a changed life. It can make them angry, but they cannot disprove it. Three years pass between verses 22 and 23 as Saul went to Arabia and did seminary, one might say. Upon his return, the unbelieving Jews again sought to kill him. The persecutor is now being persecuted. The disciples in Damascus helped him escape to Jerusalem, where he hoped to join the disciples there. Certainly, stories would have circulated of Saul’s Damascus Road experience. He had disappeared only to re-

surface after three years and the disciples were understandably afraid to allow him access to the newly formed church. Barnabus’s personal character reference, gained Saul access, where he continued to engage unbelieving Jews. They also sought to take his life, and the disciples sent him home to Tarsus, where he could perhaps operate more freely. They may have hoped the persecution of Saul would diminish over time, however, as we follow Saul’s ministry in scripture, we find it only intensified until his death in Rome. It seems that Saul had come full circle. It is ironic that the great persecutor had become, perhaps, the most persecuted apostle of all. During those years we do not hear Saul either despise nor complain about the harsh treatment he received. He likely felt it from time to time, it probably grew old, but Saul, later called Paul, had been redeemed. His past was under the blood of Christ; he was totally forgiven and Saul never got over that amazing reality. He remembered who he had been, but he lived as one who had been bought with a price. His gratitude was understandable, in that, those who have been forgiven much, tend to love much. Paul’s absolute abandon to Christ spurred him to later write, “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and delivered Himself up for me.” Galatians 2:20

**Apply:** If you have lingering regret from the past, this would be a good time to ask God to forgive you and redeem the rest of your life for His purposes. The one who knows you best loves you most.

**Praying God’s Word:** Father in heaven, we know that our bodies are Your temples, to house Your Spirit, that we are not our own and that we were bought with the price of Your Son (1 Cor. 6:19). Help us then to press on to know you (Hosea 6:). Help us be like trees planted by the water, help us to be strong, produce fruit and not wither (Ps. 1:3). Help us to deny ourselves, engage in Your call on our lives, and follow You (Luke 9:23). Respond to the Lord in prayer.

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## Friday, September 5—*The Gospel for All*

**Before you begin read: Acts 10:1-5, 11:1-18 with Colossians 3:11-14**

**Focal Passage:** “And above all virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” Col 3:14

**For thought:** How do you feel about ecumenical movements, the coming together of churches of different faiths?

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Peter undergoes a dramatic experience which will teach him something vitally important to the work to which he is called. Not only is his ministry going to collide with the old established church, but it will also cross racial lines that have been in place for centuries. Peter was a practicing Jew at the time of Christ, and he had been reared to believe certain things about Jew and Gentile relations. Jews were the chosen people and Gentiles were not. Pentecost should have given the disciples an indication of what was coming, but it was all so new! Peter is about to get a short course in “Evangelism for the World.” In God’s vision, Peter is challenged in a basic Jewish dietary law. He had never eaten assorted animals designated as “unclean.” These laws were given to the Jews in the Old Testament times, by God, for their protection against disease as well as separation from the cultures around them; this wasn’t Peter’s personal agenda. The meaning of the vision escapes him, however, until he gets a knock at the door. He is compelled by the Spirit to go to Cornelius’s house, and then it becomes clear that God is at work in Cornelius’s life at the same time as Peter’s. Cornelius had a basic understanding of the need for the Jewish God; he was devout in having his household praying and giving alms, they knew of Jesus of Nazareth and the recent events surrounding his ministry, that God was pleased with Him. He was likely a proselyte who had converted to Judaism, though his dedication was not what would bring salvation to him. Knowing about God is not enough, neither is doing things for God enough to satisfy the requirement for sin. Peter then gives them the rest of the story. This Jesus that they had familiarity with, was crucified, God raised Him up visibly, He would judge the world and had given the disciples the ministry of reconciliation. Peter’s sermon is

interrupted by the Holy Spirit falling on Cornelius’s household. They began to speak in foreign languages in the same way the disciples had at Pentecost. This was clear confirmation during those transitional times between the Old Testament temple and the Christian church, that it was a genuine move of the same Spirit. In those early days of the church, there had been no doctrinal statements, no denominational beliefs, no bylaws. The foundational belief was that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, and there is salvation through no other. Across the centuries, that is and has been the one cornerstone of the Christian faith. As denominations developed because of different preferences regarding secondary beliefs, true Christian faiths still cling to this one immutable truth, Jesus Christ as He is revealed in the scriptures, is the Savior of the World. Of the five major world religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, only Christianity adheres to that belief. All religions do not lead to God, but all people are afforded that privilege through Christ. The Bible records that people from every tribe and tongue will stand together before God - Peter, Cornelius, the Ethiopian, Saudi Arabians, Chinese, Russians, Americans; the list goes on. Whosoever will may come, so long as they surrender themselves to the one who loved them and gave Himself up for them on the cross.

**Apply:** Do you have people of other faiths in your life, particularly other nationalities? Pray for the opportunity to talk with them about their understanding of Jesus. Remember compassion, kindness, humility, patience and love; but don’t let the time go by without giving them the opportunity to have a true relationship with Jesus.

**Praying God’s Word:** Father we can come to you with confidence that we may receive Your mercy (Heb.4:16). Lord, we realize there are many who do not have that privilege because they do not know You. Help us to proclaim Jesus clearly (Col 4:4). Make us wise in the way we act toward unbelievers, to make the most of every opportunity (Col. 4:5). Let our conversations always be full of grace that we may know how to answer everyone (Col. 4:6). We want them to know You. Express your prayer to the Lord. \_\_\_\_\_

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Saturday, September 6—*The Church Speaks Life*

Before you begin read: Acts 11:19-26 with Ephesians 2:11-22 and Hebrews 10:24-25

**Focal passage:** “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up the meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Hebrews 10:24-5

**For thought:** What is your favorite, of all that you see happening in our church?

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The church in Acts Chapter 11 has now taken shape, it has grown through prayer, through fellowship, through serving, through preaching the Word, and even through persecution. Its people know they are not the “in crowd,” but there is something so compelling about their love, their joy, their generosity, their compassion and their faithfulness, that thousands have been drawn to this body of baptized believers, and to their Christ. Everywhere they went they spoke of the Life found in Him. Some had a heart to win their Jewish community, so they spoke Life into them. Some spoke Life boldly to the Greeks who were considered outsiders to many. There were those who prophesied, those who gave sacrificially, those who were sent out speaking Life into those they encountered. Some were encouragers, speaking Life within their local assembly, such as Barnabus, traveling from the Jerusalem church to Antioch to help them navigate in those early days. He was thrilled to see the Lord at work in Antioch, and he wanted Saul to get in on all that was happening. He found Saul in Tarsus, interestingly, where Saul’s journey had begun years before. Saul left the first time breathing threats against the followers of Jesus; he left this time to speak boldly in the name of Jesus. He would intern with Barnabus there, at Antioch, before taking His missionary journeys throughout the Mediterranean. The church is an amazing place when it is being built up by all those within it, each doing their part. We owe the early Jewish believers so much, because of their faithfulness to go and tell. We as Gentiles have been given the opportunity to draw near to God and

through Christ, to have His Holy Spirit. No longer alienated, we as Gentile believers can also be fitted into what God is building in our day. Not a physical building, but we are God’s building, we are His temples, we are His dwelling. He now resides within the hearts of those who have called on His name, believing that He is who He says He is. While the appearance of the meeting places may change, and worship may take on a new feel, we the church, remain the dwelling in which Jesus is known and made known. Let’s be the church, as it was in the Book of Acts, vibrant, relevant, growing, moving forward with all that we have. Let’s not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, even more so today than in the Book of Acts. We have this treasure to share. Let’s use every avenue at our disposal to speak Life into our lost and dying world.

**Apply:** Thinking back on your week’s conversations, how would you characterize your speech? Did you speak Life into someone this week? If not, ask the Lord to make you aware, in the days to come, of ways to build somebody up and to share the Good News of what Jesus came to bring. Speak Life!

**Praying God’s Word:** Father, we have walked through some key events of the early days of Your church, and we marvel at Your power and Your tender mercy for them and for us. Because of Your great love, they were not consumed by the evil of their day, nor are we (Lam. 3:22). Help us as we go out in the same way that they did in the Book of Acts. As we instruct the lost gently, speaking the truth in love, grant them repentance, oh Lord, and lead them to the knowledge of Your truth, that they might escape from the trap of the devil, who Has taken them captive (2 Tim. 2:25-6). Not to us, but to Your name be the glory! (Ps. 115:1). We are Your church, and we bear Your name. What a beautiful name it is, the name of Jesus. Respond to Him below.

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