

Reading Schedule for April 24-30, 2017

The early church in forging forward with courage and prayer. Their generosity is noticeable. There are adjustments that are necessary, but the biggest factor is the opposition they are experiencing. By chapter 8 the church will be scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Stephen will be the first martyr; Ananias and Sapphira lie to the disciples and to God; there is so much at stake that God takes them home. This is sure to be a significant week of reading.

April 24 – Acts 4:1-22: “So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together.” (v.15) This is always one of my favorite. I am inspired by Peter and John, as two fishermen filled with the Holy Spirit express the gospel with great courage. On Easter Sunday, I said that the greatest proof of the resurrection is your own life. This is obviously true for these two disciples. The religious leaders were amazed at the determination of these two ordinary men. A changed life convinces people of Christ’s power. Our greatest testimony is the difference that Christ has made in our lives as we show it through our behaviors and attitudes. No one can argue with your testimony. Let people see what really makes a difference in your life as you point people through your good works to the power of Jesus Christ. How do you respond to this challenge?

April 25 – Acts 4:23-37: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.” (v.32) The power of the early church was in their generosity and unity. The Holy Spirit was stirring their hearts to meet needs. Their generosity was voluntary, and it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. They didn’t sell all their private property, but only as much as was needed. Generosity cannot be mandated. At times, people have used money to try to control the church. The early church realized that all they had was from God. This biblical principle freed them to be very generous. Does this make sense? How do you respond to the call of generosity?

April 26 – Acts 5:1-11: “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.” (v.11) This event has always intrigued me, as well as created some curiosity. Some have suggested that Ananias and Sapphira were not true believers, and that is why they lied about their giving. I don’t believe that because they were part of the community. They may have been insecure and were trying to fit in; they might have wanted to look good. This lack of integrity and deep-seated dishonesty had the potential to divide the church. Integrity was and is essential to the church. Whenever we try to deceive God’s people, we are deceiving God. This not only destroys one’s testimony, but can become a cancer in the church. God was going to protect his church, so the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was punished severely. The infant church needed God’s strong protection and oversight for it to survive. Do you agree? How do you respond to this story?

April 27 – Acts 5:12-42: “Peter and the other apostles replied: ‘We must obey God rather than human beings!’” (v.29) Do you think there will ever be a day when the authorities challenge our faith to the degree that the Apostles were challenged as they began the early church? Jesus told the disciples that they would face persecution. Remember the beatitude that says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The verse continues with, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you

and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10-12) How do you respond to the Apostles’ courage? What are your thoughts about persecution?

April 28 – Acts 6:1-15: “Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” (vv. 3 & 4) These verses have directed my decisions as a leader. They are words of survival for me as a pastor. They apply to everyone because if we are really going to accomplish something, we have to delegate. The ministry of the Word and prayer is a primary focus for the call of the Pastor and ministry leaders, but organization and administration is very important as well. You cannot organize the church to grow, because that is the work of the Holy Spirit. But when the Holy Spirit moves and there is no organization to help structure the ministries of the church, then the lack of administration impedes the marvelous things that the Holy Spirit wants to do. This affirms the body life of the church. Everyone is important. There are overseers; there are leaders; and there are gifts of service . . . all necessary for the strength of the church. Everyone is important. How do you respond to the necessity of delegation and teamwork?

April 29 – Acts 7:1-59: “And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’” (v.56) This is a very interesting statement because it declares that Jesus was standing at the right hand of God. But everywhere in Scripture it says that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. But as Stephen proclaims the Gospel and confronts the religiosity of the people and their hardheartedness, they take things into their own hands and stone him to death. We know from the Book of Revelation that martyrs would be honored in eternity. Jesus stands up for Stephen, the first martyr, as a gesture of honor. Stephen’s life was cut short, but his place in heaven is one of great distinction. This is the culmination of persecution so that the next phase of the early church is to scatter the people. We will read about that tomorrow. How do you respond to this man Stephen? What inspires you about this chapter?

April 30 – Acts 8:1-25: “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.” (v.4) There is no question that we would say being scattered from your home is devastating. I actually can’t imagine the chaos it would cause. But their discomfort was used by God as they spread the Gospel everywhere. They lost their homes and many of their possessions, but they had each other. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit was with them every step of the way. They are a great example to us of how to face adversity. The Lord used this uncomfortable situation for the furtherance of his kingdom as the Gospel went out from Jerusalem. This principle has surfaced in my life several times. In the context of leadership in the church, some of the most difficult times have turned out to be the most fruitful. I have feared that we are sometimes too comfortable at New Harvest, and God is challenging me to speak words that stretch us rather than soothe us. Do you agree? How do you respond to this crisis of being scattered?

Prayers: Pray for at least a dozen newcomers that are now attending our church. May God help us to be inclusive, and build unity with them.