

# The Early Leaders

## Stories of the First Christian Heroes Beyond the Apostles

### Discipleship Study

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# The Early Leaders

## The Movement called “The Way”

### Introduction

Before they were called "Christians," the followers of Jesus were known by another name: "The Way." This wasn't just a cute nickname. It was a declaration. They weren't just starting a new religion. They were walking a new path—a way of living that was so different, so radical, that it turned the ancient world upside down.

You've probably heard about Jesus and the twelve apostles. Maybe you know about Peter's boldness or John's love. Perhaps you've learned about Paul's incredible transformation from a violent persecutor to a passionate preacher, but what about the others? What about the hundreds, then thousands, then millions of everyday people who caught the fire of this new faith and carried it across the Roman Empire? What about the businesswomen who funded the mission? The encouragers who lifted up the discouraged? The partners who stood by Paul when everyone else abandoned him? The martyrs who gave everything—including their lives—for this new Way? These are their stories.

If you're new to faith or growing in your discipleship, you might feel like you're supposed to be like the "big names"—the apostles, the famous preachers, the spiritual giants. But the truth is, most of the early church was built by people whose names we barely know. They weren't perfect. They weren't all bold speakers or miracle workers. They were merchants, tentmakers, jailers, Ethiopian officials, and widows. They were people like you. Some were wealthy. Some were slaves. Some were educated. Some couldn't read. Some were Jews who'd known the Scriptures their whole lives. Others were Gentiles who'd worshiped false gods until they met Jesus. What they had in common was simple: They said yes to Jesus. And that changed everything.

In the book of Acts, Luke (the author) records that the early Christian movement was called "The Way" at least six times. Here are a few examples:

*"About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way." (Acts 19:23)*

*"I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison." (Acts 22:4)*

*"However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect." (Acts 24:14)*

Why "The Way"? Because Jesus Himself said, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6).

Following Jesus isn't about following rules or rituals. It's about walking a path—His path. And on that path, you're never alone. These early leaders walked it before you, and their footsteps light the way.

# STEPHEN - THE FIRST TO DIE FOR THE NAME

**Scripture References:** Acts 6:1-15; 7:1-60; 8:1-3

## **The Problem Nobody Wanted to Talk About**

The church in Jerusalem was exploding. Thousands of people had come to faith in Jesus. The twelve apostles were preaching daily in the temple courts, and miracles were happening everywhere. It was exciting, electric, amazing, but it was also messy.

You see, when you go from a few dozen believers to several thousand in a matter of weeks, practical problems start to pop up. And one of those problems was this: The Greek-speaking widows weren't getting their fair share of food.

Now, this might not sound like a big deal to us, but in the ancient world, widows had no social safety net. No Social Security. No retirement fund. No way to support themselves. If the church didn't take care of them, they would starve.

The twelve apostles could see that this problem wasn't going away. They needed help. So they made a decision that would change the course of Christian history:

*"Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:3-4)*

The congregation chose seven men. The first name on the list? Stephen. Here's what Luke tells us about Stephen:

*"Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people."  
(Acts 6:8)*

Wait a minute. Stephen was supposed to be serving food to widows. How did he end up performing miracles?

This is one of the beautiful truths of the Kingdom of God: When you're faithful in the small things, God often uses you in big things. Stephen didn't complain that he was "just" serving food while the apostles got to preach. He served faithfully. And God noticed.

Stephen wasn't content to just hand out bread. He also spoke about Jesus with such wisdom and power that people couldn't resist his arguments. The Greek-speaking Jews (called "Hellenists") would debate with him in the synagogue, trying to prove he was wrong about Jesus. But they couldn't win.

*"But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke." (Acts 6:10)*

Here's a truth you need to know: When people can't defeat your argument, they often attack your character instead. That's exactly what happened to Stephen. Since his opponents couldn't win the debate, they did what people have done throughout history—they lied about him.

*"Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, 'We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.'" (Acts 6:11)*

They dragged Stephen before the Sanhedrin—the same religious council that had condemned Jesus to death just a few years earlier. They brought in false witnesses who claimed Stephen had said Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs Moses had given them.

It wasn't true, but the mob didn't care. The high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

What happened next is one of the longest speeches in the book of Acts. Stephen didn't defend himself. Instead, he gave them a history lesson—a sweeping overview of God's faithfulness to Israel, from Abraham to Solomon. But Stephen wasn't just reciting history. He was building a case. With each story, he showed a pattern: God's people had always rejected God's messengers. They'd rejected Joseph. They'd rejected Moses. They'd rejected the prophets. And now, Stephen said, they'd rejected the Righteous One—Jesus Himself.

*"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it." (Acts 7:51-53)*

Can you imagine the tension in that room? Stephen wasn't asking for mercy. He wasn't backing down. He was calling them out, and they hated him for it. Right before Stephen gave his speech, something remarkable happened:

*"All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." (Acts 6:15)*

Even in the face of false accusations and certain death, Stephen's face glowed with the presence of God. He wasn't afraid. He wasn't defensive. He was filled with peace, and at the end of his speech, while his accusers ground their teeth in rage, Stephen looked up to heaven and saw something they couldn't see:

*"But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'" (Acts 7:55-56)*

This is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is described as "standing" at the right hand of God. Everywhere else, He's sitting. Why was Jesus standing for Stephen? Some scholars believe Jesus stood to welcome His faithful servant home. Others think He stood as a witness on Stephen's behalf—as if to say, "I see you, Stephen. I'm here. You're not alone." Either way, the image is powerful: Even in our darkest moments, Jesus sees us. He stands with us. We are never alone.

Stephen's vision enraged the religious leaders even more. They covered their ears, rushed at him, dragged him out of the city, and began to stone him. Stoning was a brutal way to die. The condemned person would be thrown into a pit, and the witnesses would hurl large stones at them until they died. It was slow, agonizing, and humiliating. Even in his final moments, Stephen did something extraordinary:

*"While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:59-60)*

Do those words sound familiar? They should. They're almost identical to Jesus' words on the cross:

*"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."* (Luke 23:46)

*"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* (Luke 23:34)

Stephen didn't just preach about Jesus. He died like Jesus. He forgave like Jesus. He loved like Jesus. He was the first Christian martyr, but he wouldn't be the last.

There's one more detail in this story that we can't ignore:

*"And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria... But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison."* (Acts 8:1-3)

The witnesses who stoned Stephen laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. He watched Stephen die. He heard Stephen's prayer. He saw Stephen's peace, and it haunted him. Years later, when Saul (now called Paul) recounted his story, he couldn't stop talking about Stephen's death. He mentioned it multiple times. It clearly affected him deeply.

Stephen never knew that his death would plant a seed in the heart of the man who would become the greatest missionary in Christian history. He never knew that his forgiveness would echo in Paul's letters for centuries to come.

1. But God knew. Sometimes our greatest impact comes not in what we accomplish, but in how we die — how we love, how we forgive, how we trust God even when everything falls apart.

In your walk with Christ, you will face opposition. Maybe it won't be as severe as Stephen's, you probably won't be stoned for your faith. But you will encounter people who misunderstand you, criticize you, or actively oppose your commitment to Jesus.

Stephen's story reminds us that our accusers don't define us. God does.

When people lie about you, God knows the truth. When people reject you for following Christ, God stands with you. When people try to discourage your faith, God has already planned your vindication.

And here's the key: Stephen didn't defend himself. He didn't argue. He didn't try to prove his innocence. He told the truth about God and left the results to God.

In discipleship, we learn this same principle: We are responsible for our faithfulness, but we are not responsible for how people respond to us. We can't control what people say about our faith.

We can only control how we respond. Stephen chose forgiveness. He chose love. He chose to trust God. Can you do the same?

Discipleship means following Jesus' example even when it costs us something. It means loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us, and trusting God with the outcome.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - STEPHEN

1. Stephen was chosen to serve food to widows, but God used him in much bigger ways. Have you ever been in a role that seemed small or insignificant, but God used it for something greater? How did that change your perspective on "small" tasks?
2. Stephen's opponents couldn't defeat his arguments, so they attacked his character with lies. Have you ever been falsely accused or misunderstood? How did you respond? How does Stephen's example challenge or encourage you?
3. Stephen's face "was like the face of an angel" even as he faced false accusations. What do you think it means to have the peace of God so visible that others can see it? Have you ever met someone like that?
4. In his final moments, Stephen prayed for his killers to be forgiven. Who in your life do you need to forgive? What makes that difficult? What would it look like to pray for them the way Stephen prayed for his accusers?
5. Stephen never knew that his death would impact Saul (Paul). How does this encourage you when you feel like your witness or testimony isn't making a difference?
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Stephen was faithful in serving widows before he was given a platform to preach. In our discipleship journey, we often want to skip to the "important" ministry. How can Stephen's example encourage you to be faithful in the seemingly small or behind-the-scenes areas of service?

Gracious Father,

Thank You for the powerful example of Stephen, who showed us what it means to be filled with Your Spirit and faithful unto death. We are humbled by his courage to stand for truth, his boldness to proclaim Your Word even in the face of opposition, and his Christ-like love that enabled him to forgive even as he was being killed.

Lord, we confess that we often lack Stephen's courage. We stay silent when we should speak. We compromise when we should stand firm. We hold grudges when we should forgive. Forgive us, and fill us afresh with Your Holy Spirit, just as You filled Stephen.

Help us to see Jesus as Stephen did—standing at Your right hand, ready to receive us and strengthen us in our own trials. Give us grace to live as faithful witnesses in our homes, workplaces, schools, and communities. When we face opposition for our faith, remind us that You are with us and that our witness may plant seeds that bear fruit we'll never see on this side of heaven.

Transform our hearts to reflect Stephen's compassion. When we are wronged, help us to pray for those who hurt us. When we are misunderstood, help us to respond with Your love. When we are afraid, help us to trust in Your presence.

May the story of Stephen's life and death not just inspire us, but change us. Use these truths we've discussed today to make us more like Jesus.

In Christ's name we pray,  
Amen.

# **JAMES THE BROTHER OF JOHN - A QUIET COURAGE**

**Scripture References:** Acts 12:1-2; Matthew 4:21-22; 20:20-23; Mark 10:35-40

If you blink while reading the book of Acts, you might miss him entirely:

*"It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword." (Acts 12:1-2)*

That's it. That's all we get. Two verses. James, one of Jesus' original twelve apostles, is executed by King Herod, and Luke moves on to tell us about Peter's miraculous escape from prison.

James gets two verses. Peter gets twelve.

It almost doesn't seem fair, does it? James was there from the beginning. He was one of the "inner three" — Peter, James, and John—who got to witness Jesus' transfiguration, the raising of Jairus' daughter, and Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. He left his fishing business to follow Jesus. He preached the gospel. He probably performed miracles.

And then, in one quick sentence, he's gone.

But here's what's beautiful about James' story: He didn't need fame to be faithful. He didn't need a dramatic testimony or a miraculous escape. He just needed to say yes to Jesus, even when that yes cost him everything.

## **The Sons of Thunder**

To understand James, we need to go back to the beginning.

James and his brother John were fishermen working with their father Zebedee when Jesus called them:

*"Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him." (Matthew 4:21-22)*

Notice that word: "immediately." They didn't ask for time to think about it. They didn't wait until the fishing season was over. They didn't negotiate terms. They left everything and followed Jesus.

Jesus nicknamed James and John "Boanerges," which means "Sons of Thunder." Why? Probably because they had fiery, passionate personalities.

We see this in Luke 9, when a Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus. James and John were outraged:

*"Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" (Luke 9:54)*

Jesus rebuked them. But you have to admire their passion, even if it was misdirected. These weren't timid men. They were bold, intense, and ready to defend their Lord at any cost.

One of the most awkward moments in James' story happens in Matthew 20 (and Mark 10). James and John — along with their mother—approach Jesus with a request:

*"Grant that one of us may sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."*

*'You don't know what you are asking,' Jesus said. 'Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?'*

*'We can,' they answered.*" (Mark 10:37-39)

Basically, they're asking for the best seats in heaven. They want to be Jesus' right-hand men in His kingdom.

The other ten apostles were furious. Who did James and John think they were?

Jesus didn't rebuke them for their ambition. Instead, He redefined greatness:

*"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* (Mark 10:42-45)

Then Jesus said something chilling:

*"You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with."* (Mark 10:39)

In other words: "You want to sit next to me in glory? First, you'll have to suffer with me." James said he could. And years later, he proved it.

About ten to fifteen years after Jesus' resurrection, King Herod Agrippa I began persecuting the church. He wasn't doing it out of religious conviction. He was doing it to gain political favor with the Jewish religious leaders, and his first target was James. We don't know the details. We don't know if James was given a trial. We don't know his final words. We don't know if he had a chance to preach one last time or if he was simply dragged to his execution. What we do know is this: He was beheaded. "Put to death with the sword," Luke writes.

That's it. No angelic rescue. No earthquake to break open his prison. No miraculous escape like Peter would experience just days later. James drank the cup Jesus drank. He was baptized with the baptism Jesus was baptized with. He was the first of the twelve apostles to be martyred for the name of Jesus.

## **Why Doesn't God Save Everyone?**

If you're honest, James' story might bother you. It might even make you angry. Why did God send an angel to rescue Peter from prison, but not James? Why did God allow Stephen to be stoned and James to be beheaded? Why do some believers get miraculous deliverances, while others die horrible deaths? It's a question that has haunted the church for two thousand years. And if we're being honest, we don't have a complete answer. But here's what we do know:

**GOD'S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS.** Sometimes God delivers. Sometimes He doesn't. But He is always good, always faithful, and always present with His children, even in death.

**DEATH IS NOT THE END.** For James, being beheaded wasn't a tragedy. It was a homecoming. Paul would later write, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). James would agree.

**GOD WASTES NOTHING.** James' death had an impact we can't fully measure. It strengthened the faith of other believers. It planted seeds of doubt in Herod's heart. It reminded the church that following Jesus might cost them everything.

**YOUR LIFE IS NOT MEASURED BY ITS LENGTH.** James was probably in his thirties or early forties when he died. He had less than fifteen years of ministry, but his faithfulness in those few years mattered more than a long life of compromise. James didn't write any books of the Bible. He didn't plant dozens of churches. He didn't preach to thousands like Peter or travel across the Roman Empire like Paul, but he was faithful. He followed Jesus. He served quietly. And when the moment came, he laid down his life without hesitation.

Church tradition (though not Scripture) says that James' boldness in the face of death moved his accuser so deeply that the man converted to Christianity on the spot—and was beheaded alongside James. We can't verify that story. But it's entirely plausible. Because that's what happens when people see authentic faith in the face of death. It shakes them. It changes them. It makes them wonder if maybe, just maybe, this Jesus is worth dying for. James thought so, and he proved it with his life.

## **When God's Plan Doesn't Match Your Expectations**

In your walk with Christ, there will be times when God doesn't answer your prayers the way you expected. You'll pray for healing, and it doesn't come. You'll pray for provision, and the need remains. You'll pray for open doors, and they stay closed.

James' story reminds us that God's love isn't measured by whether He gives us what we ask for. His love is constant, regardless of our circumstances.

God didn't love Peter more than James. He just had different plans for them.

If you're in the middle of unanswered prayer right now—if you've asked God for something and it hasn't happened—don't assume God has abandoned you. He hasn't. He's right there with you, just as He was with James in his final moments.

Your job as a disciple isn't to understand why God allows what He allows. Your job is to trust Him, even when you don't get the ending you wanted.

That's what James did. And because of his faithfulness, his name has been remembered for two thousand years.

True discipleship means trusting God's character more than our circumstances. It means believing He is good even when life isn't. It means remaining faithful whether He delivers us from trials or sustains us through them.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - JAMES

1. James is only mentioned briefly in Acts 12, yet he was one of Jesus' closest disciples. How does this challenge our culture's obsession with fame and recognition? What does it mean to be faithful even when no one notices?
2. James and John asked Jesus if they could call down fire on a Samaritan village. How do you see your own personality and passions being transformed as you follow Jesus? What "fiery" parts of you need to be redirected?
3. James and John boldly said they could "drink the cup" Jesus drank, even though they didn't fully understand what that meant. Have you ever made a commitment to God without fully understanding what it would cost? How did that play out?
4. God rescued Peter from prison but allowed James to be executed. How do you reconcile this? Have you ever felt like God showed up for someone else but not for you? How do you process that?
5. James was faithful in obscurity for over a decade before his martyrdom. How can you remain faithful when your life feels ordinary or hidden?
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** In our walk with Christ, we often want immediate answers to prayer and quick solutions to our problems. James' story reminds us that God's timeline isn't always our timeline. How can you trust God and remain faithful even when He doesn't answer your prayers the way you expected?

Lord Jesus,

Thank You for James, who grew from a skeptic to a servant, from doubting his brother to leading Your church. Thank You for his humility—he could have boasted of being Your earthly brother but instead called himself simply Your slave. Thank You for his wisdom that bridged divisions and his practical faith that insisted true belief must show itself in action.

Forgive us when we use family connections, positions, or privileges for our own glory rather than Yours. Forgive us when our faith is all words and no works, when we hear Your Word but fail to do it.

Give us James's wisdom to navigate difficult situations and bring peace where there is conflict. Help us to be bridge-builders in a divided world, standing firm on truth while extending grace. Teach us that genuine faith transforms how we treat the poor, control our tongues, and live out our beliefs in practical, everyday ways.

Help us to live with the humility of James—serving rather than being served, pointing others to You rather than to ourselves. May our lives demonstrate that we truly believe what we claim with our lips.

Show us where our faith needs feet today.

In Your holy name,  
Amen.

# PHILIP - TAKING THE GOSPEL BEYOND JERUSALEM

**Scripture References:** Acts 6:1-7; 8:4-40; 21:8-9

## **Not That Philip**

Let's get this out of the way first: This Philip is not Philip the apostle. This is Philip the evangelist, one of the seven men chosen alongside Stephen to serve the widows in Jerusalem.

But don't let that fool you. Just because Philip wasn't one of the original twelve doesn't mean he was second-rate. In fact, Philip's ministry was so powerful and far-reaching that he became known as "Philip the Evangelist" - one of the most effective preachers of the gospel in the early church.

Philip didn't wait for permission to share Jesus. He didn't wait for the apostles to tell him it was okay. When persecution scattered the believers from Jerusalem, Philip went to Samaria and started preaching.

And everything changed.

To understand how radical Philip's ministry was, you need to understand the hatred between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans were considered half-breeds—descendants of Jews who had intermarried with Gentiles centuries earlier. They had their own version of the Torah and their own worship center on Mount Gerizim. Jews despised them. The feeling was mutual. In fact, most Jews traveling from Judea to Galilee would take the long route around Samaria just to avoid stepping foot in Samaritan territory. That's how deep the hatred ran, but when persecution broke out in Jerusalem after Stephen's death, Philip fled to Samaria—the one place no self-respecting Jew would go.

And there, he preached Jesus.

*"Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city." (Acts 8:5-8)*

Think about that. The gospel had been confined to Jerusalem—a Jewish city, for Jewish people. But Philip broke that barrier wide open. He showed that Jesus wasn't just for the Jews. He was for everyone. Even the hated Samaritans. Demons were cast out. Paralyzed people walked. Lame people ran. And an entire city erupted in joy. This was a revival.

Not everyone was thrilled about Philip's success. There was a man in Samaria named Simon who had been performing magic tricks and convincing people he had divine power. The Samaritans called him "the Great Power of God." He was, essentially, a celebrity—the biggest name in town. Until Philip showed up.

When Simon saw the real power of God flowing through Philip, he was amazed. In fact, he believed and was baptized. As we'll see later in the story, Simon's heart wasn't right. He didn't want Jesus. He wanted Jesus' power. And that distinction would become a huge problem.

Right in the middle of Philip's wildly successful ministry in Samaria, God gave him a strange instruction:

*"Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'" (Acts 8:26)*

Let's pause here. Philip was in the middle of a revival. People were getting saved. Miracles were happening. He had momentum. And God told him to leave it all and go to a desert road. Most of us would have argued, "God, don't you see what's happening here? Can't I stay just a little longer? I'm finally making an impact!" But not Philip. He obeyed immediately.

Why? Because Philip understood something we often forget: God's assignments aren't always about the crowds. Sometimes they're about the one. On that desert road, Philip encountered an Ethiopian eunuch - a high-ranking official in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia. He was a Godfearer, a Gentile who worshiped the God of Israel. He had traveled hundreds of miles to Jerusalem to worship, and now he was heading home.

He was reading the scroll of Isaiah, but he didn't understand it. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah 53—the passage about the suffering servant who would be "led like a lamb to the slaughter."

"Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

"How can I," the eunuch replied, "unless someone explains it to me?"

So, Philip climbed into the chariot and did what he did best: He told the man about Jesus.

And the Ethiopian believed. When they came to some water, the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Philip baptized him right there on the side of the road. And then, in one of the most dramatic exits in Scripture, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch never saw him again. But he went on his way rejoicing.

Some scholars believe the Ethiopian eunuch was the first African convert to Christianity. He likely brought the gospel back to Ethiopia, planting seeds that would grow into one of the oldest Christian traditions in the world. And it all happened because Philip was willing to leave a successful ministry to obey God's voice.

Here's the lesson: God doesn't always call you to the crowds. Sometimes He calls you to the one. Sometimes your most important ministry will happen in a conversation with a stranger, a moment of obedience that seems insignificant at the time.

But God knows what He's doing. He sees the ripple effects of your obedience—even when you don't.

Meanwhile, back in Samaria, Peter and John arrived to lay hands on the new believers so they could receive the Holy Spirit. Simon the Sorcerer watched this happen and made an offer:

*"Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:19)* He was offering to pay them. As if God's power could be bought. Peter's response was brutal:

*"May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and*

*pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." (Acts 8:20-23)*

This is where we get the term "simony" - the sin of trying to buy spiritual authority or power. Simon had believed, but his heart was wrong. He wanted power, not transformation. He wanted the gifts, not the Giver. And Philip's ministry in Samaria revealed that.

We don't hear much about Philip after Acts 8, but we get one more glimpse of him in Acts 21, when Paul stays at his house in Caesarea:

*"Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied." (Acts 21:8-9)*

Philip had settled down in Caesarea and raised four daughters who all had the gift of prophecy. Think about that. Philip didn't just evangelize strangers. He raised his children to love God and use their spiritual gifts. That's legacy. That's faithfulness.

Philip's ministry wasn't just about the crowds in Samaria or the Ethiopian eunuch on the desert road. It was about raising up the next generation to carry the gospel forward.

## **Obedience Over Outcomes**

In discipleship, we often want to see results. We want to see lives changed, people saved, and visible fruit from our ministry. But Philip's story teaches us something different: Obedience matters more than outcomes.

Philip didn't know what would happen when he left Samaria to go to a desert road. He didn't know the Ethiopian eunuch would carry the gospel to Africa. He just obeyed. And God did the rest.

Your job as a disciple isn't to see the big picture or control the results. Your job is to take the next step of obedience. To follow God's voice today. To share your faith with the one person He puts in your path. You may never see the full impact of your obedience. But God does. And that's enough.

Discipleship is about faithfulness in the moment, not control of the outcome. It's about saying yes to God's prompting, even when it doesn't make sense. It's about trusting that He's working in ways you can't see.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - PHILIP**

1. Philip left Jerusalem during persecution and went to Samaria—a place most Jews avoided. Have you ever felt God calling you to go somewhere or do something that made you uncomfortable? How did you respond?
2. Philip was in the middle of a successful revival in Samaria when God told him to leave and go to a desert road. How would you have responded to that instruction? What does this teach us about God's priorities?

3. The Ethiopian eunuch was searching for truth but needed someone to explain the Scriptures to him. Have you ever been that person for someone else? Have you ever needed someone to explain the gospel to you?
4. Simon the Sorcerer believed and was baptized, but his heart wasn't right. What's the difference between believing in Jesus and truly following Him with a pure heart?
5. Philip raised four daughters who all prophesied. What does this tell us about the importance of discipling the next generation? How can you invest in others, especially young believers?
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Philip obeyed God even when it didn't make sense—leaving a successful ministry to go to a desert road. In discipleship, we often have to take steps of faith that seem counterintuitive. How can Philip's example encourage you to obey God's voice even when you don't understand the "why"?

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for Philip's example of radical obedience. He left a successful revival to minister to one person on a desert road. He crossed cultural boundaries to share the gospel with an Ethiopian stranger. He followed Your Spirit's leading even when it didn't make sense to human wisdom.

Lord, forgive us when we ignore Your promptings because they seem inconvenient or illogical. Forgive us when we value our comfort over Your call. Help us to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's direction, willing to leave the crowd to minister to the one, ready to share Jesus with anyone You place in our path.

Give us Philip's heart for evangelism—his passion for sharing the good news and his ability to clearly explain the Scriptures. Help us see divine appointments in everyday encounters. Whether You send us across the street or across the world, may we respond with immediate obedience.

Teach us that faithfulness in small things qualifies us for greater things. May we be found faithful wherever You plant us today, trusting that You are orchestrating every divine encounter.

In Jesus' name,  
Amen.

# BARNABAS - THE SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT

**Scripture References:** Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-27; 11:19-26; 13:1-3; 15:36-41

## The Name That Defined Him

His real name was Joseph. But the apostles gave him a new name: Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement" or "son of consolation." Names mattered in the ancient world. A name revealed your character, your calling, your identity. And the fact that the apostles renamed Joseph "Barnabas" tells us everything we need to know about him: He was an encourager.

In a world full of critics, cynics, and condemners, Barnabas was the guy who saw potential in people. He believed the best. He gave second chances. He opened doors for others, and his ministry of encouragement literally changed the course of Christian history.

We first meet Barnabas in Acts 4, right after the believers in Jerusalem are described as being "one in heart and mind" and sharing everything they had:

*"Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." (Acts 4:36-37)*

This is significant. Barnabas was a Levite, which means he came from the priestly tribe of Israel. He had status. He had education. He had resources, and he gave it all away. Barnabas set the tone for generosity in the early church. He didn't just talk about sharing. He did it. He sold his property and laid the money at the apostles' feet, trusting that they would distribute it to those in need. This is the first glimpse we get of Barnabas' character: He was generous, humble, and fully committed to the mission of the church. His greatest act of encouragement was yet to come.

After Saul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, he tried to join the believers in Jerusalem. But there was a problem:

*"When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple." (Acts 9:26)*

Think about that. Saul (who would later be called Paul) had spent years hunting down Christians. He had dragged men and women to prison. He had stood by and watched Stephen get stoned to death. Now he was claiming to be a follower of Jesus. Nobody believed him. They thought it was a trap. Except Barnabas.

*"But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus." (Acts 9:27)*

Barnabas vouched for Paul. He risked his own reputation to give Paul a second chance. He saw past Paul's violent history and recognized the grace of God at work in his life. Without Barnabas, Paul might never have been accepted by the church. Without Barnabas, we might not have half of the New Testament.

One act of encouragement changed everything.

A few years later, the gospel began to spread to Antioch—a major city in Syria. Greeks were coming to faith in Jesus, and the church in Jerusalem wasn't sure what to make of it. So they sent Barnabas to check it out.

*"When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord." (Acts 11:23-24)*

Notice what Barnabas did: He didn't criticize. He didn't question. He didn't impose a bunch of rules. He saw the grace of God at work, and he rejoiced. That's the heart of an encourager. They celebrate what God is doing, even when it doesn't look the way they expected. Barnabas didn't stop there. He knew the church in Antioch needed a teacher. And he knew just the guy.

*"Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." (Acts 11:25-26)*

Barnabas could have stayed in Antioch and built his own ministry. He could have taken all the credit but instead, he went and found Paul and brought him into the work. Barnabas was secure enough in his identity to share the spotlight. He didn't need to be the star. He was content to be the one who opened doors for others.

Barnabas and Paul were sent out by the church in Antioch as the first official missionaries of the Christian faith. Together, they traveled through Cyprus and modern-day Turkey, preaching the gospel, planting churches, and facing persecution. At first, the dynamic duo was called "Barnabas and Saul." Barnabas was the leader. Paul was his partner. Somewhere along the way, the order flipped. Acts 13:13, Luke starts referring to them as "Paul and his companions." Paul became the primary leader, and Barnabas stepped into a supporting role.

Some people might have been offended by that. "Hey, I was the one who vouched for you! I was the one who brought you to Antioch! And now you're taking over?" Not Barnabas. He didn't need the spotlight. He was content to let Paul lead, because Barnabas cared more about the mission than his own reputation. That's the mark of a true encourager: They celebrate the success of others, even when it costs them recognition.

After their first missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul returned to Antioch. A few years later, they decided to take a second journey, revisiting the churches they had planted, until they had a disagreement:

*"Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord." (Acts 15:37-40)*

Mark had bailed on them during their first journey. Paul didn't want to give him another chance. Barnabas did. So they split up. Paul took Silas and headed to Asia Minor. Barnabas took Mark and went to Cyprus. At first glance, this seems like a tragedy. These two great men had a falling out and couldn't work together anymore. Here's the beautiful twist: Both of them were right.

Paul was right to prioritize the mission. You can't build a strong team if people bail when things get tough. Barnabas was right to give Mark a second chance. Sometimes people need grace and mentorship to reach their potential. Guess what? Barnabas' investment in Mark paid off. Years later, Paul himself wrote to Timothy and said:

*"Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." (2 Timothy 4:11)*

Mark became one of Paul's most trusted companions. He also wrote the Gospel of Mark—one of the four accounts of Jesus' life in the New Testament. All because Barnabas believed in him when no one else did. We don't know how or when Barnabas died. Church tradition says he was martyred in Cyprus, but we can't be certain. What we do know is this: Barnabas' legacy isn't measured by how many sermons he preached or how many churches he planted. His legacy is measured by the people he encouraged.

Without Barnabas, Paul might have been rejected by the church.

Without Barnabas, Mark might have given up on ministry.

Without Barnabas, the church in Antioch might never have flourished.

Barnabas didn't need to be the star. He was content to be the one who helped others shine, and in doing so, he changed the world. In the Christian life, everyone needs grace. We've all made mistakes. We've all let people down. We've all failed in ways big and small. Maybe you've tried to serve in your church, but people won't let you forget your past failures. Maybe you've stepped away from ministry because you feel disqualified. Barnabas' story is for you. He saw past people's failures and believed in their potential. He gave Paul a second chance. He gave Mark a second chance, and both went on to do incredible things for God.

If you've been given a second chance in your walk with Christ, don't waste it. And if you're able to give someone else a second chance, do it.

The church needs more Barnabases - people who believe the best, who open doors, who invest in others even when it's risky. You can be that person. You can be a son or daughter of encouragement.

Discipleship means extending the same grace to others that God has extended to us. It means looking past people's failures to see their God-given potential. It means taking risks on people because we know God takes risks on us.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - BARNABAS**

1. Barnabas was nicknamed "the son of encouragement." If people gave you a nickname based on your character, what would it be? What would you want it to be?
2. Barnabas vouched for Paul when no one else believed in him. Have you ever had someone take a risk on you like that? How did it change your life?

3. Barnabas could have stayed in Antioch and built his own ministry, but instead he went and found Paul to partner with him. How do you respond when someone else gets more recognition than you? What does Barnabas' example teach us about humility and teamwork?
4. Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement over whether to give Mark a second chance. Who do you think was right? How do you balance high standards with grace for people who fail?
5. Barnabas invested in Mark, and years later, Mark became one of Paul's most trusted companions and wrote one of the Gospels. Have you ever invested in someone who didn't seem to deserve it? What happened?
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Barnabas believed in people's potential, not just their past. In the Christian community, we often carry shame about who we used to be. How can Barnabas' example help you see yourself (and others) through the lens of grace rather than past mistakes?

Gracious God,

Thank You for Barnabas, whose very name means "Son of Encouragement." Thank You for his generous spirit that held possessions loosely and gave freely. Thank You for his ability to see potential in people others had given up on—in Saul the persecutor, in John Mark the quitter.

Father, we confess that we are often quick to judge and slow to encourage. We see people's failures rather than their potential. We hold grudges rather than offer second chances. We compete rather than champion others' success.

Give us Barnabas's heart—eyes that see what people can become in You, a spirit that builds up rather than tears down, hands that are quick to help and slow to point fingers. Help us to be encouragers in a world full of critics.

Show us someone today who needs our encouragement. Help us to invest in people others overlook. Give us wisdom to mentor, courage to stand with the unpopular, and grace to believe the best in others.

Make us good finders, Lord—people who look for and celebrate what You are doing in others' lives.

In Christ's name,  
Amen.

## SILAS - THE PARTNER IN CHAINS

**Scripture References:** Acts 15:22-41; 16:16-40; 2 Corinthians 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Peter 5:12

Quick question: Who was Paul's most important ministry partner? If you said "Barnabas," you'd be close. But wrong. If you said "Timothy," you'd be closer, but still wrong.

The answer is Silas. If you've never heard of him, you're not alone. Silas is one of the most overlooked figures in the New Testament, even though he was with Paul during some of his most important missionary work. Silas was there when Paul planted the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth. He was there when Paul and Timothy wrote letters to those churches. He was there when Paul was beaten, imprisoned, and left for dead. Through it all, Silas remained faithful, steady, and unshakeable.

Let's meet the man nobody remembers—but everybody should.

Silas (also called Silvanus in Paul's letters) first appears in Acts 15, right after the Jerusalem Council. The church was facing its first major theological crisis: Did Gentile converts have to follow Jewish laws like circumcision and dietary restrictions—to be saved?

The apostles and elders met in Jerusalem to decide. After much debate, they concluded that Gentiles did not have to become Jews to follow Jesus. They only needed to abstain from idolatry, sexual immorality, and eating blood or strangled animals. Someone had to deliver this message to the Gentile churches. The Jerusalem leaders chose two men to go with Paul and Barnabas:

*"Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers." (Acts 15:22)*

Silas wasn't just a random guy. He was a leader. He was respected. He was trusted. The letter from the Jerusalem Council describes Silas and Judas as *"men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 15:26).*

Silas had already proven himself. He'd faced persecution. He'd suffered for Jesus. He was battle-tested. When Silas and Judas arrived in Antioch and delivered the letter, the believers rejoiced. But Silas didn't just drop off the letter and leave. He stayed and encouraged the believers.

*"Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers." (Acts 15:32)*

Silas was a prophet—someone who spoke God's word with authority. He used his gift to build up the church.

When Paul and Barnabas parted ways over their disagreement about Mark, Paul needed a new partner, and he chose Silas.

*"But Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord." (Acts 15:40)*

Think about that. Paul could have chosen anyone. He could have picked someone younger, someone more educated, someone with more charisma, but he chose Silas. Why? Because Silas was solid. He was mature. He was a leader in his own right. He was a prophet, a Roman citizen (like Paul), and someone Paul could trust completely. Silas wasn't flashy. He wasn't famous. But he was faithful, and sometimes, faithfulness matters more than fame.

Paul and Silas' second missionary journey started well. They traveled through Asia Minor, strengthening the churches Paul had planted on his first journey. Then, following a vision Paul had of a man from Macedonia begging for help, they crossed into Europe and arrived in the city of Philippi. In Philippi, they met a woman named Lydia (we'll learn about her later in this series), and she became a believer. Things were looking good.

Then trouble started. A slave girl who was possessed by a demon began following Paul and Silas around, shouting, *"These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved!"* (Acts 16:17). She did this for days. Finally, Paul got annoyed and cast the demon out of her.

This girl's owners had been making money off her fortune-telling abilities. When they realized their cash cow was gone, they were furious. They dragged Paul and Silas to the marketplace, brought them before the magistrates, and accused them of causing trouble. The crowd joined in the attack. The magistrates ordered Paul and Silas to be stripped and beaten with rods.

Let's pause here. Beating with rods was brutal. It wasn't a slap on the wrist. It was a severe, painful, humiliating punishment. After they were beaten, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison, and the jailer was ordered to guard them carefully. So, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in stocks. Most people in that situation would have been angry, bitter, or despairing. They'd been falsely accused, severely beaten, and locked in a dungeon for doing nothing wrong.

But not Paul and Silas.

*"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."* (Acts 16:25)

Read that again. They were praying and singing hymns. At midnight. In a prison. After being beaten. With their feet locked in stocks. This is one of the most powerful images in the New Testament. Paul and Silas didn't just endure their suffering. They worshiped through it. They didn't complain. They didn't demand their rights (even though they were Roman citizens and shouldn't have been beaten without a trial). They didn't curse their captors. They sang, and the other prisoners heard them.

Then, suddenly, an earthquake shook the prison. The doors flew open. The chains fell off. And the jailer, thinking the prisoners had escaped, was about to kill himself.

But Paul shouted, *"Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"* (Acts 16:28)

The jailer fell trembling before Paul and Silas and asked the question that would change his life: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul gave him the simplest, most beautiful answer in all of Scripture:

*"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."* (Acts 16:31)

That night, the jailer and his entire family were baptized. They went from captors to brothers in Christ in a matter of hours. All because Paul and Silas chose to worship instead of complain.

After Philippi, Paul and Silas continued their journey, planting churches in Thessalonica and Berea before Paul moved on to Athens and Corinth. Silas was there for all of it. He wasn't just Paul's sidekick. He was his co-laborer, his partner, his brother. In fact, when Paul wrote letters to the churches, he often mentioned Silas alongside himself and Timothy:

*"Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians..."* (1 Thessalonians 1:1)

*"Silas, Timothy and I were not 'Yes' and 'No,' but in him it has always been 'Yes.'"* (2 Corinthians 1:19)

Silas co-authored letters that would become part of the New Testament. He preached the gospel alongside Paul. He suffered with Paul. He rejoiced with Paul. He was Paul's partner in every sense of the word.

The last time we see Silas in Scripture is in 1 Peter 5:12, where Peter writes:

*"With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it."*

Silas had moved on from traveling with Paul and was now helping Peter. He was the scribe - the one who physically wrote Peter's letter as Peter dictated it. Even in his later years, Silas was serving quietly, faithfully, without fanfare. That's the kind of man Silas was. He didn't need the spotlight. He didn't need credit. He just needed to be faithful, and he was. To the very end.

In your walk with Christ, you'll have midnight moments. Moments when everything feels dark, when your prayers seem unanswered, when you wonder where God is.

Silas' story teaches us that worship isn't just for the mountaintop. It's for the valley. It's for the prison. It's for the moments when everything is falling apart.

Paul and Silas didn't sing because they felt like it. They sang because they chose to trust God, even when their circumstances screamed that God had abandoned them. You can do the same.

When the darkness closes in, when the struggle feels unbearable, when you're tempted to give up your faith—sing. Pray. Worship. Not because you feel like it, but because God is still good, even when life isn't.

And who knows? Your worship in the darkness might be the very thing that draws someone else to faith.

Discipleship means worshiping God not based on our circumstances, but based on His character. It means choosing praise over complaint, trust over doubt, and faithfulness over feelings. True worship happens when we choose God even when we don't get what we want.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - CHAPTER 5: SILAS**

1. Silas was described as a leader and a prophet who had "risked his life for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." What does it mean to risk everything for Jesus? Have you ever had to make a costly decision to follow Him?

2. Paul chose Silas as his ministry partner after parting ways with Barnabas. What qualities do you think Paul saw in Silas that made him the right choice? What qualities make someone a good ministry partner or discipleship partner?
3. Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned in Philippi for casting a demon out of a slave girl — for doing good. Have you ever suffered for doing the right thing? How did you respond?
4. At midnight, in prison, with their feet in stocks, Paul and Silas sang hymns. How is that even possible? What do you think was going through their minds?
5. The jailer heard Paul and Silas singing and ultimately came to faith. Who might be listening to how you respond to suffering? How can your response to hardship become a witness to others?
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Silas remained steady and faithful through extreme circumstances. In our walk with Christ, consistency is essential. How can you cultivate the kind of steady faithfulness Silas demonstrated, even when following Jesus is costly or difficult?

Faithful Father,

Thank You for Silas, the steady companion who stood beside Paul through beatings, imprisonment, and hardship. Thank You that even in the darkest prison, at midnight, with bleeding backs, Silas and Paul sang hymns of praise to You. Thank You for his example of worship in suffering and faithfulness in obscurity.

Lord, we confess that we often complain in small discomforts and question You in minor trials. We want to serve You only when it's convenient, comfortable, and recognized. Forgive us for our conditional commitment.

Give us Silas's steadfast faith that doesn't waver when circumstances become difficult. Teach us to worship You not just when life is good, but especially when it's hard. Help us to be faithful friends and reliable companions who don't abandon others when the going gets tough.

Remind us that You see our service even when no one else does, that You honor faithfulness even when it's never applauded. Help us to be content as supporting players in Your kingdom, knowing that every role matters and that faithful service—seen or unseen—brings You glory.

May we sing Your praises at midnight, trust You in the dark, and remain faithful wherever You place us.

In Jesus' name,  
Amen.

## TIMOTHY - THE FAITHFUL SON

**Scripture References:** Acts 16:1-5; 1 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 2:19-24; 1 Timothy 1:1-20; 2 Timothy 1:114; 3:14-17

Timothy's story starts with a problem: He was half-Jewish, half-Gentile, and in the ancient world, that made him an outsider to both groups. His mother, Eunice, was a Jewish believer. His grandmother, Lois, was also a believer, but his father was a Greek - a Gentile.

Timothy grew up in a household divided by culture and religion. He learned the Jewish Scriptures from his mother and grandmother, but he wasn't fully accepted by the Jewish community because his father was Greek. And he wasn't fully Greek either, because his mother raised him with Jewish values.

He was caught between two worlds - God had a plan for Timothy, and it involved one of the most important partnerships in the New Testament.

When Paul arrived in Lystra during his second missionary journey, he heard about a young disciple named Timothy. The believers in Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him. He had a good reputation. He was faithful. He was growing in his faith, and Paul saw potential.

*"Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek." (Acts 16:3)*

Wait. Paul circumcised Timothy. Didn't Paul just spend the entire Jerusalem Council arguing that Gentiles didn't need to be circumcised?

Yes. But here's the key difference: Timothy wasn't a Gentile. He was half-Jewish, and if Timothy was going to be effective in ministry to Jewish communities, he needed to remove any barriers that might prevent Jews from listening to the gospel. This wasn't about salvation. This was about strategy.

Paul wasn't compromising the gospel. He was removing unnecessary stumbling blocks so that more people could hear the good news, and Timothy agreed to it. Even though circumcision as an adult was painful and humiliating, Timothy trusted Paul's leadership and did what needed to be done. That's the first thing we learn about Timothy. He was willing to sacrifice for the sake of the mission.

Over the next several years, Timothy became Paul's most trusted companion. He traveled with Paul, preached alongside him, and carried out important assignments on Paul's behalf. Timothy was young, which made some people question his authority. In fact, when Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy, he had to address this issue directly:

*"Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity." (1 Timothy 4:12)*

Timothy wasn't supposed to defend his age. He was supposed to prove his maturity through his actions, and he did.

One of the most beautiful things about Timothy's ministry is that Paul trusted him completely. When Paul couldn't visit a church personally, he sent Timothy. When the church in Corinth was struggling, Paul sent Timothy to remind them of Paul's teaching (1 Corinthians 4:17). When Paul was imprisoned and needed to check on the believers in Philippi, he sent Timothy (Philippians 2:19).

And every time, Paul spoke of Timothy with the highest praise:

*"I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel."* (Philippians 2:20-22)

Paul called Timothy his "true son in the faith" (1 Timothy 1:2) and his "dear son" (2 Timothy 1:2). He loved Timothy like a father loves a son, and Timothy loved Paul the same way.

Here's something most people don't know about Timothy: He struggled with fear and insecurity. In 2 Timothy 1:7, Paul writes:

*"For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline."*

Why would Paul say this? Because Timothy was timid. He was naturally shy, hesitant, and prone to fear. Paul also told Timothy to "fan into flame the gift of God" (2 Timothy 1:6), which suggests that Timothy's spiritual gifts were in danger of being neglected or hidden. And in 1 Corinthians 16:10-11, Paul warns the Corinthians:

*"When Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. No one, then, should treat him with contempt."*

Timothy wasn't a bold, fearless leader like Paul or Peter. He was quiet, gentle, and sometimes struggled with confidence, but God used him anyway. You see, God doesn't only use the bold and the brave. He also uses the timid and the fearful - if they're willing to trust Him.

Timothy's insecurity didn't disqualify him. It made him dependent on God, and that dependence made him a powerful instrument in God's hands.

The last glimpse we get of Timothy is in Paul's final letter - 2 Timothy, written from a Roman prison shortly before Paul's execution. Paul knew he was about to die. He knew Timothy would soon be leading the church without him. So, he wrote one last letter, full of encouragement, instruction, and fatherly love:

*"I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also... I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness... Do your best to come to me quickly... Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you... Do your best to get here before winter."* (2 Timothy 1:5; 4:7-9, 11, 21)

Paul was alone. Most of his companions had abandoned him. He was cold, lonely, and facing execution, and the one person he wanted by his side was Timothy.

That tells you everything you need to know about Timothy's faithfulness.

Paul trusted Timothy more than anyone else, and when Paul faced his darkest hour, he called for his "dear son."

We don't know if Timothy made it to Rome before Paul died. We don't know how Timothy's life ended. Church tradition says he was eventually martyred for his faith, but we can't confirm it. What we do know is this: Timothy was faithful. From the moment Paul chose him as a young man in Lystra to the final days of Paul's life, Timothy never wavered. He wasn't the boldest. He wasn't the most confident. But he was faithful.

To God, faithfulness is what matters most.

If you're growing in your faith and you struggle with fear, insecurity, or self-doubt, Timothy's story is for you. Timothy wasn't a superhero. He was young, timid, and often unsure of himself, and God used him in powerful ways because Timothy was willing to trust God and do the work, even when he didn't feel qualified.

Discipleship requires the same thing. You're not going to feel ready. You're not going to feel confident. You're going to doubt yourself, question your calling, and wonder if you're really cut out for ministry.

**Remember God doesn't call the qualified. He qualifies the called.**

If God could use a timid young man like Timothy to lead churches, serve as Paul's representative, and help write Scripture, He can use you too. You don't have to be fearless. You just *have to* be faithful.

True discipleship means trusting God's strength more than our own ability. It means stepping out in obedience despite our limitations. It means believing that God delights in using weak vessels to display His power.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - TIMOTHY**

1. Timothy had a complicated family background - half-Jewish, half-Gentile. How did his unique background position him for ministry? How has your background (even the painful parts) prepared you for what God has called you to do?
2. Paul circumcised Timothy not because it was required for salvation, but to remove barriers to ministry. When is it appropriate to make sacrifices or compromises for the sake of reaching others? When is it not?
3. Timothy struggled with fear and timidity, yet Paul trusted him with major responsibilities. How does Timothy's example encourage those who don't feel naturally bold or confident?

4. Paul told Timothy to "fan into flame the gift of God." What do you think causes spiritual gifts to fade or go dormant? What does it mean to "fan them into flame"?
  
5. Even in his final days, Paul called for Timothy. What does this say about the power of faithful friendship and partnership in ministry?
  
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Timothy had to overcome fear and insecurity to fulfill his calling. What fears or insecurities are holding you back from fully embracing your calling as a disciple? How can God use those weaknesses to display His strength?

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank You for Timothy's example—a young man who didn't let his youth be a stumbling block but instead became an example to believers in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity. Thank You for his genuine faith, learned first from his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice, and then lived out faithfully in Your service.

Forgive us when we make excuses for why we can't serve You—too young, too old, too inexperienced, too fearful. Forgive us when we let insecurity keep us from using the gifts You've given us. Forgive us when we lack Timothy's teachable spirit and sincere devotion.

Lord, raise up Timothys in our generation—young people who will serve You wholeheartedly, who will stand firm in sound doctrine, who will endure hardship for the sake of the gospel. Give parents and mentors Paul-like hearts to invest in the next generation.

Whether we are young or old, help us to live as examples worth following. Give us Timothy's genuine concern for others, his willingness to be mentored, and his courage to stand for truth even when it costs us. Fan into flame the gifts You have given each of us.

May we be found faithful, sincere, and bold in our generation.

In Christ's name,  
Amen.

# LYDIA - THE BUSINESSWOMAN WHO OPENED HER HOME

**Scripture References:** Acts 16:11-15, 40

## The First Convert in Europe

Lydia's story is short but significant. She's only mentioned in a few verses in Acts 16, but her impact on the early church was enormous. Lydia was the first person in Europe to become a Christian. Think about that. Before Lydia, Christianity was a Middle Eastern movement. It was centered in Jerusalem, spreading through Judea, Samaria, and parts of Asia Minor. But when Paul crossed over to Macedonia in response to his vision, everything changed.

And the first person to respond to the gospel in that new frontier was a woman - a businesswoman, no less. When Paul and Silas arrived in Philippi, they looked for a place to pray. On the Sabbath, they went outside the city gate to a river, where they expected to find a place of prayer. Why the river? Because Philippi apparently didn't have a synagogue. In Jewish tradition, you needed at least ten Jewish men to form a synagogue. If there weren't enough men, the Jewish community would meet near a body of water for prayer and ritual washings. At the river, Paul found a group of women gathered, and one of them was Lydia.

*"One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message."* (Acts 16:14) Three important things to note about Lydia:

1. She was from Thyatira, a city in Asia Minor known for its trade guilds, particularly those dealing in purple dye.
2. She was a dealer in purple cloth, which meant she was wealthy. Purple dye was extremely expensive in the ancient world. It came from a rare sea snail, and it took thousands of snails to produce just a small amount of dye. Purple clothing was worn by royalty and the super-rich. If Lydia was in the purple cloth business, she was successful.
3. She was a "worshiper of God," which means she was a Gentile who had converted to Judaism (or at least adopted Jewish beliefs and practices). She wasn't born into the faith. She chose it.

When Lydia heard Paul preach about Jesus, "the Lord opened her heart to respond." That phrase is key. Lydia didn't come to faith because of her own wisdom or Paul's persuasive arguments. God opened her heart. He made her receptive to the truth. When Lydia believed, she didn't waste any time. She and her entire household were baptized immediately. Lydia didn't stop there. She did something that would become a pattern for believers throughout the book of Acts:

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

Lydia opened her home to Paul and his companions. She didn't just believe the gospel - she lived it out immediately by practicing radical hospitality. This might not seem like a big deal to us, but in the ancient world, hospitality was everything. Inviting strangers into your home was risky. It cost money. It required effort. And for a single woman to invite men into her home was especially bold. She didn't hesitate. She saw a need, and she met it. Her home became the first house church in Europe.

After Paul and Silas were released from prison (remember the earthquake ), they went straight to Lydia's house:

*"After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left." (Acts 16:40)*

This suggests that Lydia's home had become the gathering place for the new believers in Philippi. Her house was the church, and that church would go on to become one of Paul's most beloved and faithful congregations. When Paul later wrote his letter to the Philippians, he thanked them repeatedly for their partnership in the gospel and their financial support of his ministry.

That generosity likely started with Lydia. She didn't just open her home once. She made it the hub of Christian community in Philippi. She used her resources - her wealth, her home, her influence—to further the gospel.

Lydia's story challenges some assumptions we might have about the early church. First, women played a vital role in the spread of Christianity. Lydia wasn't just a passive recipient of the gospel. She was an active participant. She hosted the church. She probably funded Paul's ministry. She used her business connections to spread the gospel.

Second, God uses people of all backgrounds. Lydia was a Gentile, a woman, and a businessperson. Three groups that were often marginalized in the ancient world. But God chose her to be the first believer in Europe and the foundation of the Philippian church.

Third, wealth isn't inherently evil. Some Christians today are suspicious of wealthy believers, as if having money automatically makes you less spiritual. Lydia shows us that wealth can be a tool for the kingdom - if it's used wisely and generously. Lydia didn't hoard her wealth. She invested it in the gospel. She used her resources to bless others and advance the mission of the church.

In discipleship, one of the most powerful things you can do is open your life to others. Maybe you can't offer financial support. Maybe you don't have a big house or extra resources., but you can offer your presence. Your story. Your time.

Lydia's hospitality wasn't just about providing food and shelter. It was about creating a space where people could encounter God and grow in their faith.

You can do the same. Whether it's opening your home for a small group, inviting someone new to church for coffee, or simply being present for someone who's struggling, your hospitality matters.

And who knows? The person you invite today might become the next great leader in the church.

Discipleship often happens around tables, in living rooms, during conversations over coffee. It's not always formal or structured. Sometimes the most powerful ministry is simply opening your life and letting others experience Christ through your hospitality and authentic relationship.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - LYDIA

1. Lydia was a "worshiper of God" before she met Paul, which means she was already seeking truth. How does a heart that seeks God position us to recognize Him when we encounter the gospel?
2. The Bible says, "the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." What does this teach us about how people come to faith? What is our role, and what is God's role?
3. Lydia immediately invited Paul and his companions to stay at her house. Why is hospitality such an important part of Christian community? How can you practice hospitality, even if you don't have a lot of resources?
4. Lydia was a businesswoman who used her wealth and influence for the gospel. How can Christians today use their careers, resources, and influence to further God's kingdom?
5. Lydia's home became the first church in Philippi. What does this teach us about the importance of opening our homes and our lives to Christian community?
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Lydia's hospitality created a space where people could encounter God and grow in their faith. In discipleship, community is essential. How can you create or contribute to a space where others feel welcomed and safe to grow spiritually?

Gracious Father,

Thank You for Lydia, the businesswoman whose heart You opened to respond to the gospel. Thank You that she was the first believer in Europe, a woman of means who immediately used her resources and her home for Your kingdom. Thank You for her eagerness—she didn't hesitate to be baptized with her household or to insist that Paul's team stay in her home.

Lord, forgive us when our hearts are closed to Your Word and resistant to Your call. Forgive us when we hold our possessions, our homes, and our success tightly rather than holding them with open hands. Forgive us when we wait to serve You "someday" instead of responding with Lydia's immediate obedience.

Give us hearts that are open to Your truth and ready to respond. Help us to see our work, our resources, and our influence as gifts from You to be used for Your purposes. Teach us Lydia's generous hospitality—that our homes and our lives should be open to serve Your people and advance Your gospel.

Whether we have much or little, help us to steward it faithfully. Show us how to use our businesses, careers, and resources to support Your work. May we be known as people whose hearts are open to You and whose doors are open to others.

Make us eager responders like Lydia—quick to believe, quick to obey, and quick to share what we have been given.

In Christ's name,  
Amen.

# PRISCILLA & AQUILA - THE POWER COUPLE OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

**Scripture References:** Acts 18:1-3, 18-28; Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19

If you want to see what a healthy Christian marriage looks like, look at Priscilla and Aquila. They're always mentioned together. Always serving together. Always working side-by-side in the mission of the gospel. They were tentmakers by trade, but their real work was building the church. Wherever they went, they opened their home, disciplined believers, and created communities of faith. They were the ultimate ministry power couple.

We first meet Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18, when Paul arrives in Corinth during his second missionary journey:

*"After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them." (Acts 18:1-3)*

Priscilla and Aquila had been forced to leave Rome because of an edict from Emperor Claudius expelling all Jews from the city. This was likely due to conflicts between Jews and Christians in Rome (Christianity was seen as a Jewish sect at the time) So Priscilla and Aquila relocated to Corinth and set up their tentmaking business. When Paul arrived and discovered they shared the same trade, he moved in with them. This wasn't just a business arrangement. Priscilla and Aquila became Paul's ministry partners. They worked together, worshiped together, and advanced the gospel together.

Here's something interesting; In most of the references to this couple, Priscilla's name comes first. "Priscilla and Aquila." In the ancient world, the husband's name almost always came first, but in four out of six mentions of this couple in the New Testament, Priscilla is listed first.

Why? We can't be certain, but it's possible that: Priscilla was from a higher social class than Aquila, or Priscilla was the more prominent or influential of the two in ministry, or the writers simply wanted to honor her contributions. Whatever the reason, it's clear that Priscilla was not a background figure. She was a coleader with her husband, respected and valued by Paul and the early church.

One of the most significant moments in Priscilla and Aquila's story happens in Ephesus. After Paul left Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila traveled with him to Ephesus, where they stayed while Paul continued his journey. While they were there, a man named Apollos arrived. Apollos was impressive. He was "a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures." He was "fervent in spirit" and taught about Jesus accurately.

But there was a problem: "He knew only the baptism of John" (Acts 18:25).

In other words, Apollos understood that the Messiah had come, but he didn't fully understand the work of the Holy Spirit or Christian baptism. His theology was incomplete.

So what did Priscilla and Aquila do?

*"When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately." (Acts 18:26)*

They didn't embarrass him publicly. They didn't criticize him in front of the congregation. They didn't post a blog calling him a heretic. They invited him to their home and disciplined him privately. This is a masterclass in gracious correction. Apollos was a gifted teacher, but he needed more training. Priscilla and Aquila saw his potential and invested in him, and it worked. After being disciplined by Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos went on to become one of the most influential preachers in the early church. He powerfully defended the gospel in public debates and helped strengthen the believers in Achaia. All because Priscilla and Aquila took the time to disciple him.

Priscilla and Aquila had a pattern: Wherever they went, they opened their home for the church. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians from Ephesus, he sent greetings from "Aquila and Priscilla" and "the church that meets at their house" (1 Corinthians 16:19). When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he again mentioned "Priscilla and Aquila" and "the church that meets at their house" (Romans 16:3-5).

In Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome, Priscilla and Aquila hosted house churches. They didn't just attend church - they were the church.

This kind of hospitality required sacrifice. It cost money. It took time. It meant opening their lives to people who were messy, broken, and needy, but Priscilla and Aquila did it anyway, because they understood that the church isn't a building - it's a community, and communities are built in homes.

In Romans 16:3-4, Paul writes:

*"Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them."*

We don't know the details, but at some point, Priscilla and Aquila put their own lives in danger to protect Paul. Maybe they hid him from a mob. Maybe they helped him escape during a riot. Maybe they stood between him and his attackers. We don't know. But Paul never forgot it. And he made sure the churches knew about their courage.

Priscilla and Aquila were willing to risk everything - their safety, their business, their lives - for the sake of the gospel and for their brother in Christ.

The last time we hear about Priscilla and Aquila is in 2 Timothy 4:19, when Paul sends his greetings to them near the end of his life. They were still faithfully serving. Still opening their home. Still investing in the kingdom. Priscilla and Aquila never wrote a book of the Bible. They never preached to thousands. They never planted dozens of churches.

But they were faithful. They used their home, their business, and their lives to advance the gospel.

And that's a legacy worth emulating.

One of the beautiful things about Priscilla and Aquila's story is that they did everything together. They weren't competing with each other. They weren't trying to outdo each other. They were partners - in marriage, in business, and in ministry.

In discipleship, we need partnerships like that. We need people who will walk alongside us, serve with us, and hold us accountable. Maybe it's a spouse. Maybe it's a ministry partner or small group. Maybe it's a mentor or discipleship relationship.

Whoever it is, find someone who will partner with you in following Jesus. Someone who will encourage you, challenge you, and remind you that you're not alone. Discipleship isn't a solo sport. Neither is the Christian life.

The most effective ministry happens when believers work together, combining their gifts and supporting each other's weaknesses. We need each other—for encouragement, accountability, and the strength that comes from bearing one another's burdens.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - CHAPTER 8: PRISCILLA & AQUILA**

1. Priscilla and Aquila are always mentioned together, serving as a team. What does their partnership teach us about healthy relationships and ministry? How can couples serve God together?
2. When they heard Apollos teaching incomplete theology, Priscilla and Aquila corrected him privately and graciously. How can we correct others without embarrassing or shaming them? Why is this important?
3. Priscilla and Aquila opened their home for house churches in multiple cities. What would it look like for you to use your home (or your resources) to build Christian community?
4. Paul said Priscilla and Aquila "risked their lives" for him. What does it mean to be willing to risk everything for a brother or sister in Christ? Have you ever had to do that?
5. Priscilla is often listed before Aquila in Scripture, which was unusual in the ancient world. What does this tell us about the value of women in ministry and leadership?
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Priscilla and Aquila modeled the power of partnership and teamwork. In discipleship, we often say "iron sharpens iron." Who are your partners in following Christ? How can you cultivate deeper partnerships that help you grow in faith and obedience?

Faithful Lord,

Thank You for Priscilla and Aquila, the husband and wife team who served You together with one heart. Thank You for their generous hospitality that opened their home to the church. Thank You for their courage that risked their lives for Paul. Thank You for their gentle wisdom that mentored Apollos. Thank You for their example of partnership in marriage, ministry, and mission.

Father, forgive us when our homes are closed to others and when we value our comfort over kingdom hospitality. Forgive us when we sit silently rather than gently teaching those who need instruction. Forgive us for marriages and partnerships that are divided rather than unified in purpose.

Give us hearts like Priscilla and Aquila—willing to sacrifice, eager to serve, ready to invest in others. Help us to see our homes not just as private retreats but as ministry centers. Teach us to disciple others with patience and grace, correcting what needs correcting while building up and encouraging.

For those who are married, help us to serve You together, supporting rather than competing, building up rather than tearing down. For all of us, help us to work well with others in kingdom partnerships. Show us who needs mentoring, who needs hospitality, and who needs our support.

May our lives and homes be marked by generous, sacrificial love for You and others.

In Jesus' name,  
Amen.

# PHOEBE - THE DEACON AND DELIVERER

**Scripture References:** Romans 16:1-2

Phoebe gets exactly two verses in the Bible, but those two verses pack a punch:

*"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me."* (Romans 16:1-2)

That's it. Two verses, hidden in those verses is a story of courage, faithfulness, and leadership.

Here's what we know. Phoebe was a deacon (or servant) in the church at Cenchreae, which was the eastern port city of Corinth. She was a "benefactor" which means she was wealthy and used her resources to support Paul and others in ministry. Most importantly, Phoebe was the one who delivered Paul's letter to the Romans.

Think about that. The book of Romans is arguably the most important theological letter in the New Testament. It's Paul's magnum opus - his clearest, most systematic explanation of the gospel.

And who did Paul trust to deliver it? A woman. A deacon named Phoebe.

Delivering a letter in the ancient world wasn't like dropping something in the mail. It was a dangerous, difficult, expensive journey that could take weeks or even months. Phoebe had to travel from Corinth to Rome (a journey of over 800 miles.) She would have traveled by ship across the Adriatic Sea, then overland through Italy. She would have faced storms, bandits, and wild animals. She would have had to find food, shelter, and protection along the way. Then when she arrived in Rome, she wouldn't just hand over the letter and leave.

She would have read it aloud to the churches in Rome. In the ancient world, most people couldn't read, so letters were read out loud to the congregation. Phoebe would have been the first person to proclaim the truths of Romans to the Roman Christians. She would have answered their questions, explained Paul's theology, and defended his teachings. In other words, Phoebe wasn't just a mail carrier. She was Paul's representative. She was a teacher, a leader, and a trusted messenger.

Paul calls Phoebe a "deacon" (or "servant") of the church in Cenchreae. The Greek word is *diakonos*, which is the same word used for male deacons in 1 Timothy 3. This tells us that Phoebe held an official leadership role in her church. She wasn't just a volunteer. She was recognized and appointed as a deacon. Paul also calls her a "benefactor" (or "patron"). This was a term used for wealthy individuals who financially supported others. Phoebe used her resources to help Paul and many others in ministry.

She was generous, influential, and trusted.

Paul's commendation of Phoebe is significant. He doesn't just say, "Hey, Phoebe is coming to visit." He says, "Receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people."

In other words, "Treat her with honor. Respect her. Listen to her. Help her with whatever she needs." Paul is essentially telling the Roman church, "Phoebe is legit. She's one of us. She's a leader. Don't dismiss her because she's a woman. Give her the respect she deserves." This is important, because in the ancient world, women often weren't taken seriously in public leadership roles. But Paul is making it clear that Phoebe is an exception—or rather, that she represents what should be normal in the church.

Women aren't second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. They're co-laborers, co-leaders, and coheirs with Christ.

We don't know what happened to Phoebe after she delivered the letter to the Romans. We don't know if she stayed in Rome, returned to Corinth, or traveled elsewhere in ministry.

But we do know this, every time someone reads the book of Romans, they're benefiting from Phoebe's faithfulness. Without Phoebe, we might not have Romans. Or if we did, it might have been lost, damaged, or misunderstood.

But because Phoebe said yes to God's call, because she made the dangerous journey, because she faithfully delivered and explained Paul's letter, we have one of the most important books in the Bible.

Phoebe's legacy lives on every time someone reads Romans 1:16: *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes."*

That message from Paul made it to Rome because of Phoebe.

Phoebe's story reminds us that God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Phoebe wasn't an apostle. She wasn't a famous preacher. She was a businesswoman, a deacon, and a faithful servant, but God entrusted her with one of the most important tasks in the early church - delivering the book of Romans.

If you're growing in your faith, you might feel like you don't have much to offer. You might think you're not educated enough, gifted enough, or spiritual enough to make a difference.

**But that's not true. God can use you. Right where you are. With whatever you have.**

Maybe your "book of Romans" is your testimony. Maybe it's your time, your encouragement, your prayers, your presence, your practical service.

Whatever it is, don't underestimate it. God can take your ordinary faithfulness and use it to change lives and advance His kingdom.

Discipleship means being faithful with what you've been given—not comparing yourself to others or waiting until you feel "qualified." It means trusting that God delights in using ordinary vessels for His extraordinary purposes.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - PHOEBE

1. Phoebe was entrusted with delivering the book of Romans—one of the most important letters in the New Testament. What does this tell us about Paul's trust in her leadership and ability?
2. Paul calls Phoebe a "deacon" and a "benefactor." How did Phoebe use her resources and position to serve the church? How can you use your resources (time, money, influence) to serve others?
3. Paul tells the Romans to "receive her in a way worthy of his people." Why do you think he felt the need to say this? What does this teach us about honoring and respecting leaders, especially women in ministry?
4. Phoebe made a dangerous, expensive journey to deliver Paul's letter. What does this teach us about sacrifice and commitment to the mission of the gospel?
5. Phoebe gets only two verses in the Bible, yet her legacy is tied to one of the most important books in Scripture. How does this encourage you when you feel like your contributions are small or unseen?
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Phoebe was faithful with what she had, and God used it in powerful ways. In discipleship, we often feel like our contributions are small or insignificant. How can Phoebe's example encourage you to be faithful with whatever God has given you, trusting Him to multiply your efforts?

Faithful Lord,

Thank You for Phoebe, servant of the church and benefactor of many. Thank You that Paul trusted her with his most important letter, carrying the Book of Romans from Corinth to the believers in Rome. Thank You for her faithful service, her generous support of ministry, and her willingness to travel far to fulfill her calling.

Father, forgive us when we see service as beneath us or when we serve half-heartedly. Forgive us when we want recognition more than we want to be useful. Forgive us when we fail to support and help those who are laboring for the gospel.

Give us Phoebe's servant heart—willing to use our resources, time, and energy to support Your work and Your workers. Help us to be trustworthy people who can be counted on for important tasks. Teach us that there is no hierarchy of service in Your kingdom—that carrying a letter is as sacred as preaching a sermon when done for Your glory.

Show us who needs our help today. Give us eyes to see and meet practical needs. Whether we are called to serve behind the scenes or up front, may we do it with excellence and joy. Help us to be generous patrons and faithful helpers who make ministry possible for others.

May we serve without seeking credit, give without demanding recognition, and work without measuring our value by visibility.

In Jesus' name,  
Amen.

## APOLLOS - THE ELOQUENT TEACHER

**Scripture References:** Acts 18:24-28; 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:4-9; 16:12; Titus 3:13 Apollos was impressive. Really impressive. He was "a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures." He was "a native of Alexandria", one of the most intellectually sophisticated cities in the ancient world. He was "fervent in spirit" and spoke with "great fervor."

When Apollos started preaching in Ephesus, people were blown away. He argued persuasively in the synagogue, proving from Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah.

But there was a problem: "He knew only the baptism of John" (Acts 18:25).

Apollos understood that the Messiah had come. He knew Jesus was that Messiah, but his theology was incomplete. He didn't fully understand the work of the Holy Spirit, Christian baptism, or the full implications of Jesus' death and resurrection.

He was preaching truth, but not the whole truth.

That's when Priscilla and Aquila stepped in. They invited Apollos to their home and "explained to him the way of God more adequately" (Acts 18:26).

This moment is huge. Apollos could have been offended. He could have said, "Who are you to correct me? I'm the educated one here. I'm the one with thorough knowledge of the Scriptures!"

But he didn't. Instead, Apollos humbled himself and received their teaching. That humility would make all the difference. After being discipled by Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos went to Achaia (the region around Corinth) and became an even more effective minister:

*"When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah." (Acts 18:27-28)*

Apollos was a gifted debater. He could take on the toughest opponents and demolish their arguments using Scripture alone. He wasn't just about winning arguments. He was "a great help to those who by grace had believed." He strengthened the faith of believers and equipped them to stand firm.

Apollos wasn't just smart. He was useful.

Unfortunately, Apollos' success in Corinth led to an unexpected problem. Some believers started forming factions around their favorite teachers. Some said, "I follow Paul." Others said, "I follow Apollos." Still others said, "I follow Cephas (Peter)." (1 Corinthians 1:12)

The Corinthian church was dividing into fan clubs, treating Paul, Apollos, and Peter like competing celebrities.

Paul's response was sharp:

*"What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." (1 Corinthians 3:5-7)*

Paul and Apollos weren't rivals. They were partners. Paul planted the church in Corinth. Apollos came later and helped it grow. Neither of them made it happen - God did. Apollos wasn't competing with Paul, and Paul wasn't jealous of Apollos' success. They were on the same team, working toward the same goal. One of the most telling details about Apollos comes in 1 Corinthians 16:12:

*"Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity."*

Paul wanted Apollos to go back to Corinth, probably to help resolve the divisions in the church. But Apollos refused. Why? We're not told, but it's likely that Apollos didn't want to make the problem worse. If some Corinthians were already forming an "Apollos party," his presence might only fuel the division. So, he said no to Paul, not out of defiance, but out of wisdom. He didn't want to be a source of conflict in the church.

That takes integrity. Apollos could have gone to Corinth and enjoyed the adoration of his fans, but he chose the health of the church over his own ego.

The last mention of Apollos is in Titus 3:13, where Paul tells Titus to "do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way and see that they have everything they need." Apollos was still traveling, still ministering, still serving the churches. He never wrote a book of the Bible. He never became as famous as Paul or Peter. But he was faithful. And his faithfulness strengthened countless believers.

### **He was humble enough to be taught!**

Apollos was brilliant, educated, and gifted. But when Priscilla and Aquila corrected him, he didn't get defensive. He listened. He learned. He grew. In discipleship, one of the hardest things to do is admit you don't have it all figured out. Especially if you're used to being the leader, the teacher, or the one with answers. Discipleship requires humility. It requires being willing to say, "I need help. I need to learn. I need to grow."

If you're too proud to be taught, you'll never mature in Christ. But if you're humble enough to receive correction, you can become the kind of disciple God uses powerfully.

Apollos shows us that even the most gifted people need mentoring and discipleship. Even the most knowledgeable believers need to keep learning.

No matter how far you've come in your walk with Christ, stay teachable. Stay humble. Stay open to correction. That's how you keep growing.

True discipleship means maintaining a learner's posture throughout your entire life. It means recognizing that spiritual maturity isn't about knowing everything - it's about being humble enough to keep learning from God and from others He places in your path.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - CHAPTER 10: APOLLOS

1. Apollos was intelligent and gifted, but his theology was incomplete. Have you ever been in a situation where you thought you knew the truth, but later realized you had more to learn? How did you respond?
2. When Priscilla and Aquila corrected Apollos, he humbled himself and received their teaching. How do you typically respond to correction? What makes it hard to accept correction graciously?
3. The Corinthians formed factions around Paul, Apollos, and Peter. Why is it dangerous to idolize Christian leaders? How can we honor and learn from teachers without creating "celebrity culture" in the church?
4. Apollos refused to go to Corinth when Paul asked him to, likely because he didn't want to fuel division. Have you ever had to say no to a good opportunity because it wasn't the right thing for the situation? How did you make that decision?
5. Paul said, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow." What does this teach us about teamwork in ministry? How can we celebrate the success of others without feeling threatened?
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Apollos was willing to be taught, even though he was already knowledgeable. In discipleship, staying teachable is essential. What are some ways you can remain humble and open to learning as you grow in your walk with Christ?

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for Apollos—eloquent, knowledgeable, fervent in spirit, and yet humble enough to be taught. Thank You that when Priscilla and Aquila gently corrected his incomplete understanding, he received their instruction with grace. Thank You for his example of using his gifts powerfully while remaining teachable and humble.

Lord, forgive us when we think we've learned enough and close our hearts to correction. Forgive us when we use our gifts for our own glory rather than Yours. Forgive us when pride makes us unteachable and when insecurity keeps us from using our gifts at all.

Give us Apollos's combination of confidence and humility—bold in proclaiming what we know to be true, yet humble enough to admit what we don't know. Help us to develop our gifts and abilities, not for applause, but to serve You more effectively. Teach us to receive correction graciously and to be lifelong learners of Your Word.

Show us that being teachable is not weakness but wisdom, that growing in understanding is not shameful but commendable. Help us to speak persuasively about You while remaining humble before You.

Use our gifts, whatever they may be, for Your kingdom and Your glory alone.

In Christ's name,  
Amen.

# TITUS - THE TROUBLESHOOTER

**Scripture References:** 2 Corinthians 7:5-16; 8:16-24; Galatians 2:1-3; Titus 1:1-16; 2 Timothy 4:10

If Timothy was Paul's "beloved son," then Titus was Paul's "reliable fixer." When Paul had a difficult situation that needed to be handled, he sent Titus. When a church was in chaos and needed strong leadership, he sent Titus. When a mission required toughness, wisdom, and diplomacy, he sent Titus. Titus was the troubleshooter of the early church.

We don't know as much about Titus as we do about Timothy. Titus is never mentioned in the book of Acts, which is strange considering how important he was to Paul's ministry. What we do know from Paul's letters is that Titus was one of Paul's most trusted and capable co-workers.

We first encounter Titus in Galatians 2, during a crucial moment in church history. Some Jewish believers were teaching that Gentile converts had to be circumcised and follow Jewish law to be saved. This was a direct attack on the gospel of grace. If they were right, then Jesus' death wasn't enough - you needed Jesus plus the law.

Paul knew this was wrong. So he went to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles, and he brought Titus with him:

*"Yet not even Titus, who was with me and was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised, even though some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves."* (Galatians 2:3-4)

Titus was a Greek - a full-blooded Gentile. And Paul used him as a test case. If the gospel was truly by grace through faith alone, then Titus didn't need to be circumcised to be saved. The apostles agreed. Titus remained uncircumcised, proving that Gentiles could be fully accepted in the church without becoming Jews first. Titus' very presence was a declaration: The gospel is for everyone, and it's by grace alone.

Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth was complicated. He loved them deeply, but they had major problems - sexual immorality, divisions, pride, false teaching, and rebellion against Paul's authority.

At one point, Paul wrote them a very harsh letter (sometimes called the "painful letter,". After sending it, Paul was filled with anxiety. Had he been too harsh? Would the Corinthians reject him completely?

He was so worried that he couldn't focus on his ministry. He traveled to Macedonia, hoping to meet Titus and hear how the Corinthians had responded, and when Titus finally arrived, he brought good news:

*"But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever."* (2 Corinthians 7:6-7) Titus had gone to Corinth and delivered Paul's letter. And instead of rejecting Paul, the Corinthians repented. They grieved over their sin.

They longed to see Paul again. Titus had accomplished what seemed impossible - he had restored a broken relationship between Paul and the church.

How did he do it? By being both firm and compassionate. Titus didn't sugarcoat the truth, but he also didn't beat the Corinthians over the head with it. He loved them, challenged them, and called them back to faithfulness. And it worked.

After the Corinthians repented, Paul gave Titus another difficult assignment - Organize a collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem. This wasn't just about money. It was about unity. Paul wanted the Gentile churches to support the Jewish believers in Jerusalem as a sign of their connection and mutual love. Fundraising is hard. It requires tact, persistence, and the ability to inspire people to give generously. Titus was perfect for the job.

Paul writes:

*"But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative." (2 Corinthians 8:16-17)*

Titus didn't just obey Paul's instructions. He was enthusiastic about it. He cared about the Corinthians and wanted to see them grow in generosity. Under Titus' leadership, the Corinthians gave generously to the collection.

Later in Paul's ministry, he sent Titus to the island of Crete to "straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5). This was no easy task. Crete had a reputation for being a difficult place. Even one of their own prophets said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons" (Titus 1:12). The churches in Crete were young, disorganized, and surrounded by a pagan culture that valued dishonesty and immorality. False teachers were causing trouble. The believers needed strong leadership. Paul sent Titus—his most reliable troubleshooter.

In his letter to Titus, Paul gives him clear instructions:

- Appoint qualified elders in every church (Titus 1:5-9)
- Silence false teachers (Titus 1:10-16)
- Teach sound doctrine to different groups—older men, older women, young men, young women, slaves (Titus 2:1-10)
- Remind believers to live godly lives and do good works (Titus 3:1-11)

Paul trusted Titus to handle all of this - and more. Titus wasn't just a messenger. He was a leader, an organizer, and a teacher in his own right.

The last time we hear about Titus is in 2 Timothy 4:10, when Paul writes from prison:

*"Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia."*

Some people read this and think Titus abandoned Paul, just like Demas did. But that's not what Paul is saying. Demas "deserted" Paul because he "loved this world." But Titus simply "went" to Dalmatia. There's no condemnation, no criticism. Titus was likely on another mission assignment, continuing the work Paul had given him.

Titus remained faithful to the end—serving the churches, spreading the gospel, and troubleshooting problems wherever he went. Titus never wrote a book of the Bible (though he has a letter addressed to him). He's never mentioned in Acts. He's not as famous as Timothy or Peter or John, but Titus got things done.

He restored broken relationships. He organized campaigns giving. He appointed leaders. He silenced false teachers. He established churches in difficult places.

Titus was the kind of person every movement needs - someone who's reliable, capable, and willing to do the hard work that others avoid. He wasn't flashy. But he was faithful. And that's what mattered most.

In discipleship, one of the most important qualities you can develop is reliability. Showing up. Keeping your word. Following through. Doing what you say you're going to do - even when it's hard. Titus was reliable. Paul could count on him to handle difficult situations, deliver hard messages, and complete tough assignments. If you want to be used by God in powerful ways, if you want to be trusted with greater responsibilities in the Kingdom, start by being reliable in the small things.

Show up to church. Keep your spiritual disciplines. Follow through on your commitments. Do what you say you're going to do. It might not be glamorous. It might not get you recognition, but it will build your character and position you for greater ministry.

Discipleship is often measured not by dramatic moments but by consistent faithfulness over time. God is looking for people He can count on - people who will serve faithfully whether anyone notices or not, who will finish what they start, and who will remain steady through trials.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - CHAPTER 11: TITUS**

1. Titus was Paul's "troubleshooter", the person he sent when things were difficult or complicated. What qualities do you think made Titus effective in this role?
2. Titus was used as a "test case" for the gospel during the Jerusalem Council. How did his presence prove that salvation is by grace alone? Why was this so important for the early church?
3. Titus successfully restored the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians. How did he do this? What does this teach us about conflict resolution and reconciliation?
4. Paul sent Titus to Crete—a notoriously difficult place—to organize the churches. Have you ever been given a difficult assignment that felt overwhelming? How did you handle it?
5. Titus was reliable and consistent, even when the work was unglamorous. How does reliability and faithfulness build trust in relationships and ministry?

6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Titus was known for doing the hard work that others avoided. In discipleship, there are often difficult steps we need to take—having hard conversations, addressing sin, serving in unglamorous ways. How can Titus' example inspire you to do the hard work of following Christ, even when it's uncomfortable.

Gracious Lord,

Thank You for Titus, the reliable troubleshooter who could be trusted with the hardest assignments. Thank You for his ability to bring order to chaos, reconciliation to broken relationships, and maturity to struggling churches. Thank You that he didn't shrink from difficult tasks but fulfilled them with grace and wisdom.

Father, forgive us when we avoid hard conversations and difficult assignments. Forgive us when we create more problems than we solve, when we stir up conflict rather than bring peace. Forgive us for being unreliable when others need us most.

Give us Titus's character—trustworthy, mature, and capable. Help us to be peacemakers and problem-solvers in our families, churches, and communities. Give us wisdom to handle sensitive situations with grace and truth. Make us people others can depend on when things get tough.

Help us to see difficult assignments not as burdens but as opportunities to serve You and grow in faith. Give us courage to speak truth in love, even when it's uncomfortable. May we be instruments of Your reconciliation and restoration in broken places.

Make us reliable, Lord—people of integrity who finish what we start and can be trusted with what matters most.

In Jesus' name,  
Amen.

## **CONCLUSION: YOUR PLACE IN "THE WAY"**

You've just spent time with eleven remarkable people - the unsung heroes of the early church.

**Stephen**, who forgave his killers while they stoned him.

**James**, who quietly gave his life for the gospel without fanfare.

**Philip**, who obeyed God's voice and took the gospel to unexpected places.

**Barnabas**, who believed in people when no one else did.

**Silas**, who sang hymns in a prison cell.

**Timothy**, who overcame his fears to become a faithful leader.

**Lydia**, who opened her home and her heart to the gospel.

**Priscilla and Aquila**, who disciplined leaders and hosted churches.

**Phoebe**, who carried the book of Romans across dangerous roads.

**Apollos**, who humbly received corrections and grew in wisdom.

**Titus**, who fixed problems and established churches in hard places.

None of them were perfect. None of them were apostles. None of them were Jesus. But **all** of them said yes when God called. And their obedience changed the world. Now it's your turn.

One of the most powerful truths of the early church is this: God builds His kingdom through ordinary people. You don't have to be the next Billy Graham or Mother Teresa. You don't have to preach to stadiums or write bestselling books.

You don't have to be famous, gifted, or extraordinary.

You just have to be available. Stephen was serving food to widows when God used him to shake Jerusalem. Lydia was selling purple cloth when God made her the foundation of the European church. Silas was just doing his job when God used his worship to bring a jailer to faith.

What if God wants to use you right where you are - in your job, your neighborhood, your church, your family? What if your "ordinary" life is exactly where God wants to do something extraordinary?

**As you've read these stories, maybe you've identified with one (or several) of these leaders.**

Maybe you're like **TIMOTHY**, battling fear and insecurity, but God is calling you to step up and lead anyway.

Maybe you're like **PHILIP**, and God is asking you to leave comfortable ministry and invest in the one person no one else notices.

Maybe you're like **PRISCILLA AND AQUILA**, and God wants to use your home as a place where people encounter Him.

Maybe you're like **TITUS**, and God is calling you to tackle a hard situation that everyone else has avoided. Or maybe you're like **STEPHEN**, and God is calling you to stand for truth, no matter the cost.

Wherever you are in your journey, God has a place for you! Two thousand years ago, a small group of believers turned the Roman Empire upside down. They had no buildings, no budgets, no marketing campaigns, no political power. What they had was Jesus. And that was enough. They loved boldly. They gave generously. They forgave radically. They served humbly. They worshiped in the darkness. They stood for truth even when it cost them everything, and the gospel spread like wildfire.

Today, the gospel is still advancing. And God is still using ordinary people to carry it forward. People like you. People who are growing in their faith and want to make a difference. People who've experienced the grace of God and want to share it with others. People who aren't perfect, but who are willing to say yes to Jesus.

The world needs more people like the early leaders of "The Way." Will you be one of them? If you're walking the road of discipleship, you already know what it means to follow Jesus. You've counted the cost. You've decided that He's worth it. But maybe you're wondering if you have what it takes. Maybe you feel ordinary, inadequate, or insignificant. The early leaders felt the same way.

They weren't superheroes. They were tentmakers and merchants, young men and businesswomen, encouragers and troubleshooters. They were ordinary people who said yes to an extraordinary God.

Now, God is calling you to do the same.

He's calling you to use your story to point others to Jesus.

He's calling you to open your life to people who need to see authentic faith.

He's calling you to be a living testimony that Jesus transforms lives and makes all things new.

You don't have to wait until you're "perfect" to start serving. The early leaders of "The Way" didn't wait until they were perfect. They just started walking, one step at a time, and so can you.

**Your story isn't over. In fact, it's just beginning.**



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