

Acts: Turn the World Upside Down – Back from Failure

Aaron Brockett | Acts 3:1-7; 4:1-4, 11-13

Wow. How are we doing? It's better after that. I think John just took us to church. And now I've got to follow that. So let me just pray, go home, be blessed. Don't agree. Do not agree with that.

Hey, it's good to see you. You guys doing good? You guys look good. I want to welcome you. If this happens to be your first time to be with us, we are so glad that you are here and I hope that this place eventually begins to feel like home.

Before we jump in, just a couple of things I want you to be aware of. First of all, immediately following the service here in a few moments, if you just make your way across the gathering to the gym area we've got a place called Life Group Connect. We would love to give you some information about our Life Group ministry and how you can get involved in that because it's a great way to make a big church feel a lot smaller when you can build some relationships with other people, go deeper with other people, and be able to do life with them. So give that a shot. Just go over there after the service and just check all of that out.

I want you to know that, especially if you are new around here, in January we are launching our first multisite location on the north side of Indy. One guy, super excited! I love you. We're going to be launching temporarily at Creekside Middle School. So if you live closer to Creekside Middle School than you do to this location, you might want to check that out and say, "Maybe that's where I could be involved to worship and to serve."

We had a callout meeting last hour up in the Block at 9:00 where our campus pastor, Greg Anderson, just shared his heart and shared some things about that. If you missed it, don't worry, we'll have some others this fall. Maybe, if God is stirring up in your heart, maybe, just maybe, as we teach through the Book of Acts, maybe there will be this kind of stirring where God is calling you to be a part of something new, to pioneer something, maybe you want to be a part of that.

Then lastly, on October the 9th and 10th, it's a Friday night and a Saturday morning, we're going to holding our first ever men's conference here at the church. Jake, Matt, and I are going to be teaching the main sessions. We're just going to be talking to the heart of men and what it means to be godly men. We'll be doing some fun, creative stuff. I've heard rumors that we might be flipping cars in the parking lot, which would be awesome. I don't know if that will be happening or not, but I'm voting for it. So ladies, sign your man up for that, guilt him into it. It'll work. Guys, invite friends, neighbors, co-workers to come together so we can share in a time that will challenge us to be godly men.

Ladies, I don't want you to think you have been forgotten because we are planning and praying for a women's conference for you in the spring. There will not be any car flipping involved, unless you want it. So speak up now or forever hold your peace. It would be an amazing women's conference if we did that. That's coming up. Registration for the men's conference is open right now, so get online and sign up.

If you've got a Bible go ahead and find your way to Acts 3. As you are turning there, let me go ahead and just pray.

Lord God, we come to You this morning. It's always a daunting task for me to stand up here and look out across this room and to think that maybe I might have something to say to every person sitting here in the next few moments that would speak to their hearts, that would encourage them, that would minister to them, that would challenge them. What's even more daunting than that, God, is the fact that I could stand up here and assume that for the next several moments that I could actually be Your mouthpiece. And God, my flesh has its' limitations. I'm not able to do that.

Every one of us has probably brought in some kind of burden, some kind of distraction, something that is causing us to maybe lean away from You and lean into our own power, our own flesh. So I ask that in these next few moments together, God, that Your Spirit that we know is already alive and well in this place and is speaking and moving in our hearts, that we would just be attune to Him. God I pray that there could just be maybe one truth about Your character, and who You are, and what You say about us that we could grab hold of and leave with today, just one thing, God, that we know to be true about You. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

You know, throughout history, I think you would probably agree with me that there have been a lot of really bad *good* ideas that men and women have come up with that just didn't stand the test of time. What I mean by a bad *good* idea is an idea where a group of people got together and said, "You know, what about this?" Or maybe a group of executives got around a card table and they said, "What about this idea?" And so they launched it, they thought it was a good idea but then it just didn't stand the test of time. It was proven that this good idea actually turned out to be a terrible one.

We've got lots of examples of this. Let me kind of just limit it to a few: Several years ago Clairol, the shampoo company, came out with this shampoo idea. It's called Touch of Yogurt shampoo. And it just didn't work. Apparently dairy products are good for the hair and not good for marketing. So they eventually pulled it off the shelves.

Maybe some of you remember a few years ago when Microsoft was trying to come up with an answer for the Apple iPod and so they came out with the Zoon. How many of you are still rocking the Zoon? You're not giving up on that thing. What Microsoft did is they just said, "That's just a bad *good* idea," and they finally pulled it.

Maybe the granddaddy of all bad *good* ideas would have been this product from Pepsi. Do any of you remember this back in the 80's? Crystal Pepsi, I actually kind of liked Crystal Pepsi but it had two fatal flaws to it: Number one, it tasted no different than regular Pepsi and, number two, we already had Sprite. It just didn't work out very well so they abandoned it.

You see, none of these ideas stood the test of time. They didn't last. Now as we come to the Book of Acts, it describes to us an idea that has stood the test of time, called the church. It was started roughly 2,000 years ago by Jesus and then was handed off to 120 of His followers who were largely unproven, unqualified, and uncertain.

If you had been a fly on the wall 2,000 years ago when all of this was getting started, you probably would have assumed that they would have a nice little run before it ended up fizzling out; that their

enthusiasm would wane, or maybe they would get into an argument, or maybe they would divide over something, that it just wasn't going to last.

The irony of the beginnings of the church is that the church got started in the shadows of what appeared to be one of mankind's best ideas, which was the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was this picture of strength and stability. If you were to have lived in the Roman Empire during that time, you would have assumed that it was never going away.

And the church, in contrast, seemed weak and vulnerable and yet this morning, on my way to this church, I passed like six other churches and there is no trace of the Roman Empire. It's just an ancient relic of the past. You see, Rome was a picture of the power of men and the church is a picture of God's power through men. That's what happened in the beginning 2,000 years ago, it got started and it spread like wildfire around the Roman Empire. And they couldn't stop it.

In fact, this is what led a highly respected teacher by the name of Gamaliel to say this in Acts 5—the religious leaders had arrested the apostles and they had thrown them in prison and they were trying to figure out what to do with them. Gamaliel stands up and he says these words, He says, "... keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"

I love this next part. It says, "So they took his advice..." You see, he is basically standing up and saying, "Why are you so bent out of shape over this group of 120 followers? Why are you so bent out of shape and so defensive of the church? If this idea is of man, it'll fail on its' own. You won't have to stamp it out. But if it's of God, you won't be able to stop them; in fact you might find yourselves opposing God."

And the key to the effectiveness and the longevity of the church, the reason why you and I are sitting in this room 2,000 years later, on the other side of the world, talking about this stuff is because of what Jesus said to them in chapter 1, verse 8. He said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." And that's exactly what happened.

Now there might be some of you here this morning, or maybe you live with somebody who thinks this way, or you work with somebody who thinks this way, or this thought has crossed your mind in the past. Maybe you don't have that much of a problem with Jesus, but you do have a problem with the church. You think that the church is not such a great idea, in fact you might even say, "I think the church is a bad idea," or "I've got a problem with big church," or "I've got a problem with organized religion."

Maybe the reason why you feel that way is you've had a first row seat to when the church has messed up in some way. Maybe you've been in churches where people were singing songs like we just sang, but then out in the parking lot they were really mean spirited or judgmental. Or maybe you were in a church where there was a scandal or some sort of a moral failure, "You know what? This is just room full of hypocrites. They are just putting on a show, wearing a mask. This is a bad idea."

And I would agree with you. I've seen the church at its worst and it's awful. Many of us have given the bride of Christ a black eye. What I want you to understand is the reason why you feel that way is you can trace all of those things back to this root: The church is a bad idea when a group of people come together in the name of Jesus, but not in His power. And we lean into our own flesh rather than into the power of the Spirit.

Jesus said, to this group of 120 followers, “You will receive power, you don’t generate it. You don’t come up with it. This is not your own brilliance.” Every time the church messes up it’s when men and women forget that. That’s when people get hurt.

You see, the church will prevail and the church is the best *good* idea when we lean into the Spirit. In fact I would say it’s the hope of the world. It’s the only thing that will last from this side of eternity into all of eternity.

And the message found in the Book of Acts, and the reason why we are spending time studying it together as a church before we go multisite in January is for the reason that God never intended for us, as His followers, to be spectators of what He is doing in the world. But Jesus went to a cross so that we would get down out of the bleachers, onto the field, put the jersey on, and get in the game.

God wants us to be active participants. You see, our faith is not just a cognitive thing where we say, “I believe in God and hopefully I’ll do as much good as He wants me to do and then eventually, when I die one day, I get to go to heaven. So now I just kind of live my life doing as much as I can and not hurting anybody.” That’s not the gospel. The gospel is that Jesus went to a cross to save you from sin, but to also involve you in what He is doing by the way of His Spirit through the rest of the world.

I’ve said this before, if you’ve been around here for any length of time at all... I always feel like when Jesus ascended into heaven He needed to stay on earth a little longer because we weren’t ready to assume the responsibility that He gave to us because these 120 followers still have questions, they’re still confused, they still don’t fully get it. And Jesus is like, “I’m going to ascend into heaven. I will return one day the way that you saw Me go. Now hang out in Jerusalem and you will receive power.”

Essentially what He is doing is He is handing the keys of the church to a group of fallen and flawed men and women like you and like me. You know what that’s like? That would be like you going out and buying a brand new Ferrari and then handing the keys to a 16-year-old boy. How long do you think it’s going to take before that thing just ends up in the ditch? Probably not very long. Why? Because his maturity hasn’t caught up. It’s too much power. It’s too much of a sophisticated tool and he’s not going to be able to handle it well. Or, if the 16-year-old boy is willing and able to learn from his mistakes and to receive coaching, he might just become a really, really good driver because he’s sitting on a pretty awesome machine.

That’s exactly what the picture of the church is for us. That is the message of the Book of Acts. Jesus didn’t wait until we got all our ducks in a row and figure it all out. Jesus said, “No, you need to lean into My Spirit, precisely because you don’t yet have it figured out.”

And the first few chapters of the Book of Acts really center around the teaching and the leadership and ministry of this guy named Peter, before this other guy named Paul sort of assumes the spotlight. Now if you don’t know anything at all about Peter, or if you’ve been in the church and you do know some things about Peter, what I want you to see is that the first few chapters of the Book of Acts are Peter at his best—finally.

What do we know about Peter? Well we know that Peter was a guy who had the best of intentions and could never quite live up to them. Peter was perhaps the boldest of all the disciples, and he was the most cowardly. Peter was the guy who was always willing to go first and he was always the first to fall on his face.

Peter was the guy who was sitting in the boat with the rest of the disciples during a storm and Jesus comes walking over the water. Peter was the only one to speak up and says, “Jesus, if that is You, tell me to get out of the boat and come out to You on the water.” I’m sure the other disciples were like, “What? Peter, what are you doing? What you just said is almost crazy,” and yet Jesus was like, “Alright, come on.” And Peter got out of the boat and actually walks on water. That’s pretty incredible until what? He takes his eyes off Jesus and focuses on the storm and he sinks.

I don’t know about you, but that is me. I can totally relate to that. I have the best of intentions. I can be bold and be like, “Yeah Lord, let’s go do this.” And immediately, when life gets turbulent I take my eyes off Christ. I start leaning into the power of my own flesh and I sink.

Peter is this guy who says to Jesus, “Lord, I will never deny You, even if I have to die right alongside of You. I never will, I swear it.” Then he is sitting outside of a campfire and a little servant girl comes up and says, “Don’t you know Jesus?” And he is like, “No, no I never knew Him.” Right? And in that moment he is falling flat on his face. Peter is a guy who starts off well but just can’t fully finish it. He just ends up driving the thing into the ditch. And I can totally relate to that.

You see I have a track record, oftentimes, of starting off well and then not being able to fully finish it. It’s God’s sanctifying work in me to help me to grow and mature in my character. I remember when I was in college I took this English Literature class and the very first assignment was that we had to write out a one paragraph short story about something that had happened in our lives. She said, “The more ordinary the experience, the better.”

So I chose to write about a time when I went to the Subway restaurant and ordered a sandwich. I was writing about how I ordered the sandwich and the lady working behind the counter wasn’t very nice. So I nicknamed her Bubbles, because I said, “She could use a few of those in her life.” That was like the name of the short story.

So I turned it in and I got a 100% on it. I got an A+. And she read my short story out loud to the whole class as an example of what a model short story should sound like. And then she handed it back and at the bottom she had written a paragraph in red. She said these words. She said, “Aaron, this is extremely well written and creative,” and then she said it. She said, “You have set the bar high for my expectations for your work the rest of the semester.” She might as well have just hung a kryptonite necklace around Superman. That’s all that it took. I think the next test I flunked. I think I squeaked by in her class with a solid C-.

I don’t know if any of you can relate to this. I think all of us have the best intentions in the world, but has there ever been a moment where, despite your best intentions, you failed? You walked the aisle and you had the best intentions that this was going to be a great marriage, but it didn’t work out.

Or maybe you went to a new job and you were like, “Okay, this is the job. I’m going to turn a corner and my career is going to take off,” but you messed up. Or maybe you had a run in with the law. Or maybe you came home with a baby and were like, “I had the best intentions of being the best parent in the world,” but you’ve made some mistakes that have hurt that child and now you are like, “What do I do?”

What I want us to see, as we read through these couple of verses in Acts, is really under the umbrella of this question: How do you respond when you fail? How do you come back from failure? And Peter is a real living example of this. As we look at the details that go down in Acts 3 through 4, what I want us to

see is... I want us to pull back and look at the big picture of the narrative that God is telling through the life of Peter and how it applies to you and me, who are recovering failures.

Look what it says in Acts 3:1, “Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.” What I want you to be reminded of is that Peter and John were part of Jesus’ inner circle. There were three of them, James was the other one. And Peter and John, because they were so close to Jesus, they were sort of looked at as prominent leaders as the church was getting started.

So they were going to the temple at the ninth hour, which is about 3:00 in the afternoon, which would have been a really popular time of day for people to go to church. Keep in mind what just happened in Acts 2. Peter preached a sermon and 5,000 men gave their lives to Christ.

Look what it says in verse 2, “And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms.” Here’s what we know about this guy. He was at least 40 years of age, if not older. He was not involved in an accident that made him crippled, he was born that way. He had never walked on his own two feet.

He had just accepted this lot in life. So he would lie down at the primary entrance to the temple each day and he would beg for money. He was basically sort of feeding off the guilty conscience of people as they were going to church. How do you go to church and walk past a guy who is lame and not give him something?

And so he is there and he is asking for money and Peter and John run into him in verse 4. “And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, ‘Look at us.’ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, ‘I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!’ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.”

Can we just go ahead and admit that this was pretty incredible. Again, Peter is demonstrating the same kind of boldness that he has demonstrated in the past. “Jesus, if that is You, tell me to get out of the boat and I’ll walk on the water.” It’s sort of all or nothing right? Now he is saying to the guy, “In the name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk,” and he grabs him by the hand. What if he pulls him up and the guy just kind of collapses? Peter’s just sort of all or nothing, and yet this guy is healed.

This is the first of 14 physical healings that are recorded in the Book of Acts. It’s the first recorded miracle that we are going to read in this book. And what is just as remarkable as the miracle itself is the person who God used to perform the miracle. Keep in mind, this is coming on the shirtiltails of just two short months ago when Peter had the biggest failure of his life, he had denied Jesus. That could have demoralized him. And yet now he is back from failure.

And it says in verses 11 and 12 that the crowd all kind of clamored around him. Wouldn’t you? You heard this guy just healed somebody and you are like, “We’ve got to see that again. I’ve got something wrong with me. I’ve got this crick in my neck,” or, “I’ve got this shoulder problem. Peter, can you do that for me?”

And Peter, it might have been tempting for him to just sort of leverage this moment for his own notoriety and fame. Like Peter could have gathered them around and said, “Alright, who’s next? Who’s got a migraine? Who’s got a broken bone? Let me heal you right now in the name of Jesus!” Right?

He could have done that, but he didn’t. What did Peter do? Peter knew that it wasn’t just about the physical healing because that lame man (although his legs had been restored, and that’s an incredible thing), eventually his body is going to grow old and give out on him and he will die physically. Peter said, “No, I need to give you something that will actually heal your soul.”

So in verses 13 through 26 Peter launches into his second sermon. And it’s pretty much the same exact sermon that he preached and that we looked at in chapter 2 last week. That just makes me really, really happy. It’s just the same sermon. He’s like, “It’s the same gospel. Let me repackage it in a slightly different way for this different crowd here.”

He basically says the same thing to them. “God will meet you right where you are. He will tell you the truth about yourself. He will offer you grace that requires a response. And then He invites you to get into the game.” God wants to do something through you that is much, much bigger than yourself.

And if you go back and read the sermon that Peter preaches here (for the sake of time I don’t have time to do it, but do it on your own) here’s what you will see. This sermon tells us what we already know deep down inside about the world in which we live and about our own human heart. Basically through Peter’s sermon he is saying, “This world is messed up.”

Every day we wake up to turn on the news and all we have to do is listen for just a minute or two before we are reminded of that fact, it’s messed up everywhere. We are in need—can we say it this way? We are in need of justice. We are in need of somebody who will come and make right all the things that have gone wrong. We are in need of somebody who will say, “I know that this is messed up right now, but eventually I’m going to come to make it right.”

It’s what was on my mind when I woke up Wednesday morning and heard the news about a guy who just walks up to two news anchors on live TV and shoots them in cold blood and then posts it on social media. I mean that just messed with me the rest of the day, if not the rest of the week, to say, “Where is the justice? God, what are You going to do about that?”

You see, this sermon tells us the truth about what’s really true in our own human hearts; that my human heart is messed up as well. Now here’s the dilemma of the situation we are in. We need a judge who will bring justice and make things right in the world. And if there isn’t a judge, then what hope do we have in the world? But if there is a judge, what hope do we have personally? Because I’m just as guilty.

Romans 3 says, “There’s nobody who does right, not even one.” Psalm 130 verse 3 says, “If God were to keep track of all of our wrongs, who would be left standing?” The answer to that is: nobody. So the gospel says that Jesus is the Judge of the world Who came into the world, not with a sword in His hands, but with nails through His hands. Not to bring judgment; but to bear judgment for us so that we might face the Day of Judgment with confidence.

I was so hoping you’d clap for that, so whoever started that in the back, God bless you. I teed it up. That was awesome. It deserved a way better clap than that. I see those people who aren’t clapping. I’ve got your number. I’m just joking.

Hey, the gospel is not rigid legalism and the gospel is not cheap grace. The gospel is that there is a Judge Who will make things right. Be on His side. He came not to bring judgment against you, but to bear it, to take that off of you, to take that yoke of slavery off of you so that you could have freedom in Him.

You know, Peter says in verses 19 through 20, “Jesus blots out our sins and brings us,” and here’s the word, “...refreshment.” Do you think we need that? In fact, if you’ve given your life to Christ and refreshment isn’t something that’s on your mind or isn’t something that you’ve experienced, then come back again, and come back again and ask for that and pray for that. Say, “God, give me an understanding of the gospel,” because that should be the response and the feeling that we have to it; that we would have confidence.

Now, there are two responses to this sermon in the Book of Acts. There always is; those who clap and those who don’t! Just joking (no I’m not). There are two responses here to this sermon. One was: people were annoyed, and one was: people responded.

Look at chapter 4:1, “And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, *greatly annoyed* because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the Word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.”

So we could look at this text up close and we could look at this text far away. I want to look at this text far away, at a distance, and I simply want you to see what God is doing in the life of this guy named Peter, because two months ago he’d just committed his biggest failure ever. He’d denied Jesus, the very Son of God, three times when he swore to Him that he never would.

And if you remember, Jesus met him on a beach in John 21 and He said, “Peter, do you love Me? Do you love Me? Do you love Me?”

He said, “Yes, Lord, you know that I do.”

And He said, “Go and feed my sheep.”

And now we see him doing this. So in a matter of two-month’s time Peter has gone from the biggest failure of his life to now healing a lame man who was born that way and preaching just two sermons that resulted in the conversion of 8,000 men, not to mention the women and the children who would have been there. We’re talking upwards to 15,000 people. The church under Peter’s leadership in four chapters has gone from 120 uncertain followers to over 15,000 people who have been changed by the gospel of grace. It was a man who had failed who did that.

So, let me give you three things from this text that I want you to take with you. Here is the first thing: *Failure does not have the final say*. I’m just wondering this morning, what failures haunt you? What failures did you bring in here with you today? Did you walk in here and maybe right now your marriage isn’t going really well and yet you are sitting next to your spouse. It’s hard to worship because you know the fight you had on your way here.

All of us can be haunted by some of these failures and we’ve got these reels that are playing in our mind about some things that we said, some things that we’ve done that we wish we could take back. What I

was you to see is the gospel of grace says, “Have you failed? Yes, of course you have but it doesn’t have the final say. God is not done writing your story yet.” God did some tremendous things through failures in the Bible, and He’s still doing it by the same Spirit of His power.

So, you’ve got to ask yourself, if you knew nothing about Peter other than what we’ve already read from the first few chapters of Acts, what would you think or assume about him? Well, if you knew nothing about the collapse in the body of water, if you knew nothing about his denial of Jesus, if you knew only this you would be tempted to think that everything Peter touched turned to gold. You’d probably be tempted to think that he’d been voted most likely to succeed in his high school class, that he was the quarterback the girls all swooned around. Don’t you just hate those guys?

You would think that nothing went wrong in Peter’s life. You know, we do that with each other. It’s easy to come into a place like this, to come into church, and we compare our insides with their outsides. We think, “Man, they’ve got it all figured out.” We don’t really realize that all of us are dealing with failure, that all of us are dealing with mess-ups.

What I want you to see is that, not only did Peter fail, but Peter has his biggest failures recorded in the best-selling book of all time to never, ever be forgotten. What a bummer. Just think about the things in your life that you’re ashamed of, the things in your life that you’re so glad the person sitting next to you doesn’t know about. The odds are probably pretty high that they’ve never been published in a book. The odds are high that it’s not on YouTube for people to watch over and over again.

But Peter’s biggest failures, along everybody else’s in the Bible, are recorded right here for preachers like me to keep preaching on over and over again. I’m sure Peter is up in heaven going, “Really bro, can we just move past it?”

That’s the case. In fact, there is this guy named Paul who we are going to get introduced to here in just a couple of chapters. Paul is writing to encourage a young pastor by the name of Timothy. Listen to what he says about himself in 1Timothy, chapter 1. He says, “... formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

Paul basically just says here, “Listen, formerly I was labeled this, and this, and this.” As Paul is writing this he’s pulling out the old reels and he’s replaying these conversations, and these broken relationships, and these commitments where he has fallen on his face. And Paul is saying, “That was my past, but I received mercy. And you are not beyond redemption.”

You see; the beauty of the church and the beauty of what the Book of Acts is explaining and describing to us is... As I look out across this room all of us have hurts, and all of us have been stuck in certain destructive habits, and addictions, and behaviors, and things about our personality that we just wish that we could change. All of us have broken, shattered images of our God within us.

Yet God is assembling all of these shattered pieces of glass in this room. He is creating a grand mosaic of His grace. That’s what the picture of the church should be, not a group of people who’ve got it all together and are perfect and never have any issues, but people who are imperfect and have all kinds of issues but by God’s grace continue to gather together and lean into the power of His Spirit. And we are being redeemed by His grace. Failure does not have the final say.

Here's the second thing: *God's grace says, "Not only are you loved, but you have a role to play."* There's no such thing as damaged goods. There's no such thing as somebody who is just sort of, kind of loved by God. As Paul goes on in 1 Timothy, chapter 1, verse 15. He says, "...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." Some translations say, "The worst," "But I received mercy..."

What I want you to know about Paul here is that, as he writes this, this is not false humility. Paul isn't just saying this. This isn't just lip service. Have you ever been around somebody who is just being falsely humble? Those people are annoying. Have you ever worked out with somebody and it's just very clear that they are in way better shape than you? They turn to you and try to encourage you and say, "Hey man, I'm just trying to keep up with you, you animal."

"Be quiet! It's very clear you are far superior to me. Leave me alone as I eat my donut."

This isn't false humility. Paul's basically saying this, "Listen, if there were a sinner's Olympics, I'm winning gold baby. I'm on the top podium." Peter would chime in and say, "Yeah, I'm winning silver. You can't get any worse than us."

We're going to read about this in the next few weeks. Paul dragged men and women out of their homes kicking and screaming, terrorizing them. Peter denied Jesus three times. Basically, if they were here, they would say to us, "Man, have you failed? Absolutely. But you are not a failure. Have you screwed up? Of course you have. But you are not a screw-up. Have you royally blown it? Who hasn't? But none of that disqualifies you from God's grace. It actually qualifies you to be a recipient of His grace because Jesus came to save sinners."

And the Book of Acts is more than just a history lesson on how the church got started. Please, don't relegate it to just that. The Book of Acts is more than just a documentary on how the Spirit of God works. The Book of Acts is more than just an instructional manual on how the church should operate. The Book of Acts is a living statement that says, "God is not finished with you yet. He wants you in the game." If He didn't, if He just wanted you to be a recipient of His salvation and then just go to church and be totally caught up in it just being between you and God, then the Book of Acts wouldn't be in the Bible.

But the Book of Acts is there so that we would get down out of the bleachers, all of us misfits saved by His grace, slap on His jersey and get in the game. You see, God can take all of our circumstances and He can redeem them and He can use them. In fact, you are the best candidate for that. I know what some of you are thinking because I've talked with you before and I've been face to face with you in my office and in other places.

People come and maybe they have questions about God. Does God exist? Or, I don't know if I can get past this. Oftentimes those are very legitimate questions but there are occasions when I can tell that those questions are just smokescreens, you are just throwing everything that you can at it. Primarily, deep down inside, you don't think you can be saved. Primarily, deep down inside, you don't think you're worthy of God's grace, that if God knew everything about you He would shun you and He would leave you behind.

I want you to hear this: *God's grace can outrun your worst sin and your most demoralizing moment.* Some of you are exhausted because you are running from Him. But His grace will outrun you. Jesus came into this world not to make good people better. He came into this world to save sinners.

And when Jesus got to the earth He didn't look around and say, "Whoa God, this is way worse than We thought. Send reinforcements." No, Jesus knew exactly what He would find in the human heart. The human heart has been the same every since the Garden of Eden. We just figure out ways to continue to manifest what is dysfunctional within us. And Jesus says, "I've come to save sinners but you are not defined by your sin." You've got freedom in Christ.

Here's the third thing: *God's grace allows my character to catch up to my calling.* Or you could substitute the word *calling* with *intention*. Here me in that: *God's grace allows your character to catch up with your good intentions.*

And going back to Paul's words to Timothy, he would say, "But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost," or as the worst of sinners, "Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life."

You see what Paul is saying there? Jesus displays His perfect patience every time He gives us grace. And I don't know about you, but for so much of my life, and I have to wrestle with it even now... I can understand the nature of God and I can understand His grace, that He loves me, but if I'm really being honest at times I am like, "God, You love me but You kind of have to love me."

It's like, "I'm your boy. I'm your child. You've kind of got to love me. You've got to put up with me." But if I'm really being honest I feel at times that even though God loves me, He's kind of irritated with me. He's kind of annoyed with me. You'd think that by now I would have this figured out, or I would have gotten past this failure, or I would have gotten past this behavior.

The Scripture says very clearly that every time God gives you grace it isn't just for your salvation. But He's being perfectly patient with you as your character catches up to your calling and your intentions. I believe that everybody in this room has the best of intentions when it comes to Jesus Christ, when it comes to God, when it comes to every area, every relationship of your life. But you still fail, don't you? And sometimes it just comes out of left field. I want you to hear that God's grace is allowing your character time to catch up to those good intentions that you have.

Peter in the beginning of Acts is just a different guy. Read 1 Peter sometime—that is a letter that he wrote. In 1 Peter he is like, "Let us be sober minded." Really Peter? Like you cut off the ear of a soldier? "Let us be sober minded. He's like, "Yeah, I learned that lesson the hard way. Don't do that. Be sober minded."

And we see this as we look back at chapter 4 because we see Peter at his absolute best moment. He's no longer leaning into the power of his own flesh. After spending the night in jail a group of high priests gather together. They are trying to figure out what to do with Peter and the other apostles. So they question him in verse 7. They say this, "By what power and by what name did you do this?" And it says, "Peter answers filled with the Holy Spirit."

And I think the reason why Luke wants us to know that Peter answers being filled with the Holy Spirit is because the first time around, when he denied Jesus three times, he wasn't leaning into the power of God. He was leaning into the power of his own flesh and failed. But this time Peter is going to get this thing right.

Listen to what it says in verse 11 of chapter 4. “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.’ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men,” that’s another way of saying these are just ordinary Joe’s, these are guys who have failed, these are guys who were not perfect, “...they were astonished.” Why? “And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.”

And I love this passage because it shows us that Peter finally nails it, that in this moment he is leaning away from the power of his own flesh, away from the fear that’s in his own flesh, and into the power of the Spirit, which is what made him bold. He said, “Man, I’m not messing this up again,” and very boldly he looked at them and he said, “This Jesus is the stone that you rejected and He’s now become the capstone. There’s no other salvation under heaven and earth by which men must be saved.” And they didn’t like it. They didn’t agree with it. But they knew this. These guys had been with Jesus.

You see the church, that’s all that it is. It’s a group of imperfect sinners like you and me who are back from failure by God’s grace. So when people look at your life, what do they see? When people look at our church, what do they see? You see, they could think a lot of things about you. They could think a lot of things about our church. I mean, whenever people see our church what do they think? “Well, I don’t really like big church,” or, “I don’t really like the way you guys do music,” or, “I don’t really like the traffic jams that you create outside after the service.”

That’s all fine. But when they look at us do they say, “There are a lot of things I don’t like about that church, but it’s very clear they’ve been with Jesus? That’s very clear. They are imperfect people who’ve been with Christ and it’s shaped them and it’s changed them.” Let’s not validate the world’s opinion that church is a bad idea. When we can lean into the power of the Spirit, when we can be people who are not only saved by grace but have been changed by grace, who’ve gotten out of the bleachers and onto the field, and put on the jersey and can say, “God we want to be active participants in what You are doing in the world,” that, my friends, is the church at its best. It’s the best *good* idea. In fact, it’s the hope of the world.

We’re just going to sing a couple of songs together. Here is what I want you to do. I want to ask you to resist the urge to tune out and to say, “Let’s beat that bad traffic out the door.” I get it if you have to leave early for whatever reason, but I’m going to ask you to stay tuned in. Here is the reason why. Everything we’ve done, up to this point, is for this moment. I want you to just ask yourself: “*What has the Spirit of God pressed into my soul, just one truth about God, just one truth that I need to hear today. What is it?*”

I want you to articulate it and ask: “*How am I going to apply that? How am I going to receive it and how am I going to apply it this week?*” And maybe, if you want, you could make it real and just lean over to whoever you are with and say, “Here is what the Spirit of God said to me and this is what I’m going to do about it this week.” What is that one thing that God is impressing upon your soul? Would you have the humility to receive it and to apply it?

Let’s pray.

Father, we come to You right now and I thank You for the fact that we can come back from failure by Your grace. We are not counted out. God, help us to not sweep our failures under the rug and just try to excuse them away. But God, help us also not to become defined by them, but to realize that You came,

not to judge us, but to bear the judgment that was meant for us so that we could be free. God, may that fundamentally change us to our core.

God help us to not just be a faithful church, or a growing church, or a church that's concerned about the needs in our community; but help us to be a church that is gracious, a church that has the Spirit of Christ. That even when people come against us and oppose us and say things about us and don't like us, that they would have to say at the end of the day, "Yeah, but they've been with Jesus and it's very clear they are different."

God we know the same Spirit of power that ignited the wildfire of the church 2,000 years ago in a place called Rome is the same Spirit of power that's ready and willing and available if we just lean into Him. So help us to do that now.

I pray that in these last two songs our worship would be vertical, that we would not be thinking about others around us, or worried about the other events of the day. Those will be there when we get out. But help us, God, to lift up our voices, to raise up our hearts, to lay them bare before You, that You would do what you need to do so that we might lean into Jesus. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.