

Life Group/Personal Study

The Land Between • Week of July 5

Often we tend to idealize many of our heroes of faith in the Bible. We imagine being like them and having access to the miracle-working power they had. We think of people like Abraham who believed God for a son in his old age; Moses who led the Hebrews out of bondage into freedom; Elijah who called down fire from heaven and defeated the gods of Baal; David killing the giant; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego untouched in the fiery furnace; Daniel in the lion's den; and Ezekiel prophesying to dry bones and watching them stand to attention.

In the New Testament, the book of Acts, for example, we read about the apostle Paul and marvel at the distance he traveled to carry the Gospel across the Roman Empire. We put our faith heroes on a pedestal and often fail to remember that they were real people with real problems. Many of them had a checkered-past with mistakes and shameful regrets. Apart from the Lord, we would never remember these people. But God chooses to partner with Christ-surrendered sinners and make them heroes. God's Word teaches us that Christ has the power to transform us. The very thing we despise the most can become a host for change.

Read Acts 22:1-23

Here, standing in a stairwell in the fortress of Antonia, Paul has a chance to recount his incredible testimony to a mob who wants to kill him (see Acts 19:33-40). He explains how he was born a Jew. Although he was from Tarsus in Cilicia, he was brought up in Jerusalem and educated under Gamaliel. He was trained to carefully follow the Jewish laws and customs. Paul reminds them of his past; he was the one who persecuted followers of the Way 'hounding some to death' – a painful memory that points to the miracle of his encounter with Jesus.

But Paul says, "As I was on the road, approaching Damascus about noon, a very bright light from heaven suddenly shone down around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' Paul then tells his listeners how the risen Jesus redirected his life's course. The mob listens until Paul explains how the Lord in-

structed him to 'Go far away to the Gentiles' – at that point, they begin to shout and recommence to riot against him for blasphemy – throwing off their coats and tossing handfuls of dust into the air.

1. Think about a time you had an opportunity to honestly share your faith story. How was it received? How long did the moment of attention last?

How attentive was your listener? When did you know the moment was over? Did your 'audience' respond to your personal testimony?

Read Exodus 2:11-15, 3:1-10 (see also Exodus 34:1-11)

Think about it: both Moses and Paul were murderers in their former life. Both Moses and Paul were zealous for what they *thought* was God's way. Both Moses and Paul met God personally and audibly heard God's voice redirecting their future. Both Moses and Paul found God faithful in the Land Between. Both Moses and Paul chose a path that was nearly unbearable at times. Both Moses and Paul had a front-row seat when God showed up. And both Moses and Paul chose to press on. As a result, their faithfulness is still bringing many people to freedom.

2. God is still making a way for us today. The Lord can take us through the wilderness to freedom. God alone brings life out of death. What wilderness is surrounding you today? What fear or shameful memory has a 'death grip' on your present and future?

As we learned last week, our Promised Land *is a Person*. Perhaps the personal presence of the Lord Jesus has comforted (even surprised you) at a particularly low point. How can you encourage a friend to seek the Lord's presence in the wilderness?

If we could hear the apostle Paul speak to us today, I believe we would hear him encourage us to press on, push through. Listen to Paul's words now—

“I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead. I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us” (Philippians 3:12-14).

These words came from a man who owned his painful past of persecuting Christians. He acknowledged his history every time he shared his story realizing he could not change it (Acts chapters 9, 22, 26). Although Paul realized he could not change his history, he learned that by surrendering his life to the risen Lord daily, he could live into God’s greater purpose of proclaiming Christ’s salvation to all nations of the world, planting seeds of faith instead of fear.

Our nation celebrates Independence Day. We have a history we cannot change, extremely painful memories at certain points. While we acknowledge that though we cannot change our history, we can choose to live into a greater purpose. Let us pray that we will become a nation that honors the Lord and one another. Every life matters. And although we have a checkered-past as a country, and are now in a wilderness of sorts, we can press on and look to the One who ultimately establishes freedom.

“As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of His return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

One Year Bible Readings

July 5: 1 Chronicles 1:1-2:17, Acts 23:11-35, Psalm 3:1-8, Proverbs 18:14-15

July 6: 1 Chronicles 2:18-4:4, Acts 24:1-27, Psalm 4:1-8, Proverbs 18:16-18

July 7: 1 Chronicles 4:5-5:17, Acts 25:1-27, Psalm 5:1-12, Proverbs 18:19

July 8: 1 Chronicles 5:18-6:81, Acts 26:1-32, Psalm 6:1-10, Proverbs 18:20-21

July 9: 1 Chronicles 7:1-8:40, Acts 27:1-20, Psalm 7:1-17, Proverbs 18:22

July 10: 1 Chronicles 9:1-10:14, Acts 27:21-44, Psalm 8:1-9, Proverbs 18:23-24

July 11: 1 Chronicles 11:1-12:18, Acts 28:1-31, Psalm 9:1-12, Proverbs 19:1-3

The Land Between

Text: Acts 22:1-5, 6-22

Plain Truth:

What we _____ the most can be the host
for _____.

1. **Start each _____ with _____.**
2. **Claim _____ God’s _____.**
3. **Trust Him, even when it looks bad.**
4. **_____ at the door _____ others.**