Rock Valley Bible Church (www.rvbc.cc)

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Twelve Stages in the Bible - Church

Acts 1-12

1. We need the Holy Spirit (Acts 2).
2. We need each other (Acts 2-4).
3. We need Jesus (Acts 2-4).
4. We need servants (Acts 6).
5. We need boldness (Acts 7).
6. We need God (Acts 9, 10).
7. We need prayer (Acts 12).

Several months ago, my wife purchased an online course entitled, "How to Listen to and Understand Great Music." The course consists of some 48 lectures on the history of music. These lectures can be downloaded from the internet. The plan is that my wife and oldest daughter will listen through these lectures together as a course for my daughter's school work. Anyway, this past week, they listened to their first lecture. My wife told me about what the professor said. He said something to the effect of this, ...

> This course will cover the history of Western Music. We won't cover Asian music, or African music, or Middle Easter music. Rather, we will study the history of Western Music. Furthermore, we aren't going to cover popular music. Instead, our focus will be upon concert music. That's not to say that this music wasn't popular. Some of it was. But, our focus will be upon concert music.

And then, Yvonne said that the professor said, "Even with this narrowed scope of music, it is as much of an exercise in exclusion as it is in inclusion." In other words, the narrowed focus of the history of western music isn't narrow enough for 48 lectures to exhaust. It is still a broad topic. And the main work isn't in the inclusion of material. Rather, it is in the exclusion of material. I know the feeling.

In recent weeks, we have been in a series of sermons entitled, "12 stages in the Bible." Our aim in this study has been to work through the historical storyline of the Bible. We have divided the Bible up into 12 stages, or, historical eras, using the divisions given by Max Anders in his excellent book, "30 Days to Understanding the Bible." In my preparation each week, it has easily been more of an exercise of exclusion and not inclusion. I have taken out far more than I have included. You have to when you go through the entire Bible in 12 sermons. There have been times when we didn't even have enough time to read the text.

Today, we come to the "church" stage. There are many ways in which we could approach our topic this morning. After all, more than half of the New Testament was written to churches, or those ministering in churches. We could look at the organization of the church. Who are the leaders? What is their function? What role does the congregation play? We could look at the function of the church. What's the church supposed to do, anyway? How are the members of the church to interact with each other? How is the church to interact with those outside the church? We could look at the activities of the church. How often does it meet together? What sort of things does it do? How are the people trained? All of these things are worthy of our attention. But, this morning, we are going to look at the historical development of the church. After all, this is the flavor of all of my messages in this series.

In our study of the 12 stages, we have started with the beginning of time. We spent a Sunday with the **creation** account. This took us down to the time of the **patriarchs**. We spent a Sunday looking at Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As their family grew, they found themselves enslaved in Egypt. We spent a Sunday looking at the **Exodus**. Shortly after the Exodus, the people were led by Joshua into the promised land. We spent a Sunday looking at the **conquest**. After Israel had conquered the land, they were ruled by **judges**. So, we spent a week looking at all of the judges in chronological order. After the judges, Israel demanded a king for themselves. So, we looked at the historical development of the **kingdom**. Saul was the first king. David was the second king. Solomon was the third king. Then the kingdom split. Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Eventually, Israel was conquered by Assyria. Judah was taken exile by Babylon. We spent a Sunday examining the **exile**, from beginning to end. We spent a Sunday looking at the **return** from exile, tracing the three waves of the return. When we arrived at the **silence** stage, we looked at the historical developments between the times of the

Old and New Testaments. Last time, we looked at the **gospel** stage. This stage covered the life of Jesus, which we covered from the beginning of His ministry until the end of His earthly life. And today, we come to the church.

We will take much the same approach today as we have in other weeks. We will look at the history of the church. We will look at the birth of the church. We will look at the developing of the church. We will look at the maturing of the church. Essentially, we are going to look at the first 12 chapters of the book of Acts.

The book of Acts tells the story of the history of the church. Now, while we track the historical development of the church, that's not to say that we are merely going to have a history lesson this morning. At various points along the way, I'm going to stop and make an application to us today. Because, what God did in the days of the New Testament is the very thing that we need Him to do today. In fact, the points of application here will form the basis of my outline.

Let's begin by looking at the title of the book. The title that the Greek text gives to this book is simply, "Acts." That is, the things done. It is "actions." It is the things accomplished. This is not to be confused with "ax" as in a club that you use to chop down trees. (My son was telling me last night that he remembers the day when he learned that the book is spelled "Acts," and not "ax.")

Now, many times, this book is entitled, "The Acts of the Apostles." In fact, some of you may have this written in your Bibles. I know that in mine it does, "The Acts of the Apostles." I have heard it said on several occasions that the book is wrongly titled. It should read, "the Acts of the Holy Spirit." Those who say such things are seeking to make sure that we understand that the building of the church was done by the hands of God, not by the hands of men. In some measure, this is semantics--a battle over words. However, God does His work through the hands of men. That's how God accomplishes His purposes. He works through the prayers of His people. He saves through the preaching of His people.

While it may be semantics, the point is well made. The history that we see in the book of Acts is the history of the building of the church. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus had said, "I will build My church." The book of Acts is the recorded history as to how exactly this took place. Jesus built the church through the means of the Holy Spirit and the working of the Apostles. Now, look at verse 1, ...

> Acts 1:1-2
> The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to

do and teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.

Right here in verse 1, we see that the book of Acts is really a "part 2." The author is talking about the "first account," which he wrote. I'm sure that there are many of you who know that this "first account" was the gospel of Luke. The book of Acts was written by Luke. Luke's first work was his gospel account, where he wrote about the life of Jesus. This is what is mentioned here in verses 1 and 2, "everything that Jesus began to do and teach, until he was taken up to heaven." This describes the gospel of Luke. Luke's second work is the book of Acts, where he wrote about the church.

Luke begins in verse 3 by describing what Jesus was doing between His resurrection and ascension.

Acts 1:3
To these [apostles], He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.

When Jesus had resurrected from the dead, His focus was upon teaching His disciples. His primary topic during this time was the kingdom of God. I believe that Jesus was seeking to teach these disciples a bit about how God's working in the world would continue on. Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, His sacrifice upon the cross was the sufficient sacrifice for our sins. But, heaven is not yet. There is "something else." World history wasn't going to stop at this time. Rather, it would continue. There is another phase to God's program and the kingdom of God unfolds. There's going to be a season when God does a work among people to gather them together into His community to accomplish His purposes. There is something else coming. It is called the "church." Jesus described this "something else" in verse 4, ...

Acts 1:4-5
Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Jesus put forth the time when the Holy Spirit would do His work. John immersed people in water. But, there would be a day in which God's people would be

immersed into the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would come and fill His people. This took place on the day of Pentecost, which we will read about in chapter 2.

> Acts 2:1
> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

Pentecost is another name for the Feat of Weeks, which God commanded the people of Israel to come to Jerusalem and celebrate the first fruits of the wheat harvest (Ex. 34:22). This feast is also called "the feast of Ingathering." It takes place 50 days after the Passover, and Jews from all around would come and gather in Jerusalem for this feast. So, if you do the math, you can see that Pentecost was a bit less than 10 days after Jesus ascended. Jesus was resurrected shortly after Passover finished. Jesus then spent 40 days with the apostles, teaching them about the kingdom of God. And then, about a week later, came the day of Pentecost. (This was the day when the church of Jesus Christ, as we know it today, started.) So, look over to chapter 2, ...

> Acts 2:2-4
> 2:1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.
> 2:2 And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.
> 2:3 And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them.
> 2:4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

This is the coming of the Holy Spirit to dwell in God's people. He did so in an unmistakable way. He came like a "violent rushing wind" (verse 2). He came like "tongues of fire" (verse 3). Everyone began to "speak with other tongues" (verse 4). Nobody who had been in that room would have left unshaken!

Jesus had promised this coming to His disciples. He said, "These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:25-26). Later, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you" (John 16:7). Think about this. It is to our advantage if the Holy Spirit comes. For the Holy, Spirit, as Jesus identified Him, is our "Helper." The Holy Spirit is the one who convicts us of sin

(John 16:8-10). The Holy Spirit is the one who sanctifies us (Rom. 8:13). He is the one who helps us to pray (Rom. 8:26-27). And this is my first point of application this morning, ...

1. We need the Holy Spirit (Acts 2).

The church is not merely another man-made organization devoted to community service, like the Rotary club or the United Way. No, the church is a supernatural organization. Jesus Christ is building His church. The Holy Spirit is working in His church. We need the Holy Spirit.

To try to build a church without the Holy Spirit is like trying to build a log cabin out of look-alike plastic materials. Oh, it may like a log cabin, and you may be able to live in it. But, it isn't a log cabin. It only looks like a log cabin. To try to build a church without the Holy Spirit is like trying to build a car without an engine. Oh, it may look like an automobile, and you may be able to sit in it. But, it isn't a car, and it won't be able to move. It only looks like a car. Regarding the church, You can build a building. You can gather a group of people. And you can even call yourself a church. But, without the Holy Spirit, you are not a church. Because the church isn't something that we can organize and put together all by ourselves, because the church is a supernatural institution created by God, built by Jesus, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We need the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that will do the miraculous things among us, like He did on the day of Pentecost. Luke's narrative continues in verse 5, ...

> Acts 2:5-11
> Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs--we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God."

Do you catch what was taking place? Jews from all around the world were gathered in Jerusalem for the feast. They all knew the Hebrew language, but many

of them knew different languages as well, because they had been born into different cultures, far away from Jerusalem. And yet, they heard these Galilean men speaking to them in their native tongue. They heard Peter, Andrew, James, and John, all speaking in languages unknown to them. This was miraculous. Those who didn't know a word of Parthinian, were speaking it so well that those from Parthinia were understanding every word they were saying. Those who didn't know a word of Libyian, were speaking fluent Libyian with a perfect accent. Those who didn't know a word of Egyptian, were speaking perfect Egyptian. This was miraculous. This was the Holy Spirit.

The people took notice and were amazed and confused all at the same time.

> Acts 2:12-16
> And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others were mocking and saying, "They are full of sweet wine." But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel:

At this point in Peter's sermon, he continued on to quote from Joel 2:28-32, explaining how this was prophesied in the Old Testament. And now, it had taken place among those in Jerusalem. Following this, Peter preached Jesus to them.

By the miracles of tongues, the Holy Spirit got the attention of those in Jerusalem, so that Peter could preach to the Jewish community about Jesus. But, the work of the Holy Spirit was not done when Peter preached. No, instead, He was convicting these people of sin, righteousness and the judgment to come, just as Jesus had promised that He would (John 16:8). Peter concluded his message in verse 36 with this statement, ...

> Acts 2:36
> Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ--this Jesus whom you crucified.

Such words sunk deep into the hearts of those listening.

> Acts 2:37-41
> Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to

> Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit! Three thousand people, who repented of their sins, called upon Jesus, baptized, and added to the church came because of the work of the Holy Spirit.

But, not only do we need the Holy Spirit. Additionally, ...

2. We need each other (Acts 2-4).

We catch our first glimpse of the activity of the early church in verse 42,

> Acts 2:42
> They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

These are four activities that are crucial to the life of any church body. First, they gathered together to hear a God's word taught. Second, they gathered together to share their lives with one another. That's what the word, "Fellowship" means. It means "sharing." Third, they gathered together to break bread together. This has primary reference to the Lord's supper. But, it also has reference to eating together (2:46). Fourth, they gathered together to pray with and for one another.

Every single one of these activities are a communal activity. You can't do these things alone. You need to have a community in which to participate in these events. The apostle's teaching was a public event. People came to hear a word from the apostles. They came for unity and direction and understanding of God's will. Fellowship involves other people. It's one person with another. It's sharing your time with another. It's sharing your resources, giving to those in need. It's sharing your words, encouraging one another. It's sharing your lives with each other. The same is true here of breaking of bread. This phrase is talking about the sharing of food with others. Though you can certainly pray alone, the reference

here is to corporate prayer with one another. They were "doing life together." They were people, called out of the world, who had found a common bond together through faith in Christ, sharing their lives with one another. This is the church! We need each other.

You get a sense of how closely they lives with each other in verse 43 and following.

> Acts 2:43-47
> Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

They "had all things in common" (verse 44). When one was in need, they sold what they had, so that they could give (verse 45). When you come over to chapter 4, you see much of the same thing.

> Acts 4:32-35
> And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

This is the life of the church. There was great unity. There was great caring. There was great love. Similarly, we are called to the same thing. We need each other.

At this point, I'd like to call each of you to examine your own life. Does your life come even close to what you read here? Are you sharing your lives with other people in the church? Or, for you, is Rock Valley Bible Church for you merely a Sunday morning activity? We're talking here every day that the people were to

with one another "taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart" (2:46). It's not an accident that our church has a potluck lunch each month. At Rock Valley Bible Church, we are seeking to cultivate a community of people, who are sharing their lives together. Have you been to other's homes, sharing meals together?

We're talking here about sacrifice. People were selling their possessions and sharing them with others. Have you ever done this? We need each other. But, it's not merely that we need each other. My third point is this, ...

3. We need Jesus (Acts 2-4).

Now, this might seem to be obvious. "Of course we need Jesus," you say. But, this is easily forgotten. Also, it's what the text bears out. When Peter preached his sermon on the day of Pentecost, it was all about Jesus. After quoting from Joel, Peter proclaimed, ...

> Acts 2:22-24
> Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know--this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.

Then comes a quote from Psalm 16 proving the resurrection (verses 25-28), which is attributed to Jesus.

> Acts 2:32-33
> This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear.

Peter preached Jesus. And they all believed in the name of Jesus. Their unity was in Jesus.

In chapter 3, Peter preaches Jesus again. Peter had just healed a lame man, and the people had wonder and amazement at what happened (verse 10). And so, Peter had another opportunity to preach. And he preaches Jesus.

> Acts 3:13-16, 19, 26
> The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all. ... Therefore, repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; ... For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.

They were preaching repentance. Their preaching brought about a big commotion among the religious leaders, who hated the message that they were bringing to the people. So, the religious leaders threw Peter and John into prison. They were called to stand before the religious leaders and give account for what they were doing. And what did they say? They preached Jesus.

> Acts 4:8-12
> Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead--by this name this man stands here before you in good health. He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

We need Jesus. We need to hear the story of Jesus, crucified for our sins, raised because our justification (Rom. 4:25), seated in the heavens as our coming King (Acts 2:34). This is what the church has always been about. It's about Jesus. Acts 2

is about Jesus. Acts 3 is about Jesus. Acts 4 is about Jesus. Now, it's not merely that we need to preach about Jesus. Nor is it that we merely need to believe in Jesus. Each of us need to know and love Jesus. I love the response of the counsel after hearing Peter and John.

> Acts 3:13
> Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.

When these fisherman-disciples had been with Jesus, it changed them. And when we are with Jesus, we will be changed as well. We cannot leave His presence unaffected. We will be changed, and others will see. And that took place in the early church. By the time we reach chapter 4, there were about 5,000 in the church. It was growing by leaps and bounds, as many Jews were trusting in their Messiah, king Jesus.

But, not all was good. Within the ranks of the church were Ananias and Sapphira, husband and wife, who wanted to get into the act of selling their possessions and giving to help the needs of the saints. However, they lied in the process and kept back some of the proceeds for themselves, informing others that they had given the entire price of the property. They lied and both died on the spot (Acts 5:5, 10). But, this didn't stop the incredible advance of the church. Many were coming to faith in Christ. Many were coming into the church.

As many of you know, with greater numbers come greater burdens. In Acts, chapter 6, we see the church increasing in numbers and creating a crisis in the church. Let's read about it.

> Acts 6:1-6
> Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of

> the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

With so many people, the 12 apostles simply couldn't handle the growing responsibilities of caring for all of these people. In this case, the care of the widows was being neglected. It's not that the apostles didn't want to care for the widows. It was that they couldn't, amidst all of their other responsibilities. They came up with a great plan. With the help of the congregation, they selected seven men who will be able to devote themselves to this ministry of mercy. I like to call these men the "proto-deacons" of the church. They weren't officially "deacons," as the office hadn't yet come into being. However, they served as deacons, helping in this matter of serving the widows. And right here comes our application.

4. We need servants (Acts 6).

We need servants in an official capacity. Certainly. But, we also need servants in an unofficial capacity. There are many of you here at Rock Valley Bible Church who serve the body. For your commitment and help, I say, "Thank you." Many of you bring snacks. You help in the nursery. You teach children's church. You help with the setup and the tear-down. You help with the bulletins or the powerpoint. You volunteer to help with meals for those who are sick. And that's all well and good. And it's needed. And I'm thankful.

But, I would also encourage you to look beyond these things in your service to one another. The serving of widows is a life-on-life sort of ministry. So, be involved in life-on-life in your ministry. Care for people. Love people. Pray with people. Be a help to people. Be a blessing to people. Serve others. The church needs servants. We need servants.

At this point in the life of the early church, it faced some major difficulties. Anytime a great work of God is being done, it is greatly opposed. At the end of chapter 6, we see Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to serve widows, bring brought before the high priest on the charge of treason. In chapter 6:11, some men were induced to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God" (6:11). Some false witnesses stood up and said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us" (6:13-14).

He stood his ground and preached an excellent message. It was strong. It was convincing. It was right-on. You can read it in chapter 7. Verse 51 records how Stephen ended his message to the Jewish leaders. He ended with a punch.

> Acts 7:51-53
> You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.

And you know how it ends, don't you? Stephen was killed. He was stoned to death (verse 58). When confronting the sins of others, they didn't like it. We have much to learn from the life of Stephen. No, we don't need to be stoned like he was. But, we do need boldness, like he had.

5. We need boldness (Acts 7).

We need boldness to stand up to others and tell them of their sin. We need boldness to tell others that they need to believe in Jesus, the Righteous One! We need the boldness to tell others that salvation is only found in Jesus Christ. This was the key to the growth of the early church (Acts 4:31).

You never know the effect that it might have upon others. One of the effects that the stoning of Stephen had was that it scattered the church, south into Judea and north into Samaria.

> Acts 8:1b
> And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

One of the great stories of the book of Acts is the story of Saul of Tarsus. We see him at the beginning of chapter 8. He was a witness to the death of Stephen, ...

> Acts 8:1a
> Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.

The story of Saul's conversion is told in chapter 9.

> Acts 9:1-6
> Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."

So, Saul went to the city with his friends. Meanwhile, the Lord was appearing to a man named Ananias and told him, ...

> Acts 9:15-19
> "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened.

Saul's first action was to go to the synagogue in Damascus and proclaim that "Jesus is the Son of God" (9:20). He was "confounding the Jews ... by proving that ... Jesus is the Christ" (9:22).

You have to realize that it was no accident that Saul became a Christian. It was the doing of God. Saul was a marked man. He was in God's sights. Remember what the Lord said to Ananias, "He is a chosen instrument of Mine" (9:15).

God saved him through the most unusual and unlikely circumstances. Saul wasn't converted when he was in a Christian meeting. He wasn't listening to Peter preach about Jesus. He knew about Jesus through the preaching of Stephen, but hated the message and was glad when Stephen was put to death for preaching Jesus. Saul wasn't around any Christian influence when he was converted. On the contrary, he was on the road to persecute Christians. And God stopped Him in his tracks. From

that day forward, Saul, (who was later renamed, Paul), became one of the greatest spokesmen the church has ever known. He ended up writing 13 books of the New Testament. His education and giftedness is matched by nobody in the history of the church. He was the right man in the right place at the right time. J. Oswald Sanders has written of him, ...

> A present-day parallel to Paul [is] one who could speak in Peking in Chinese, quoting Confucius and Mencius; write closely-reasoned theology in English and expound it in Oxford; and defend his cause before the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Russian in Moscow. [1]

My point of application here is this, ...

6. We need God (Acts 9, 10).

Jesus promised to build His church. We need Him to come and build His church. We need God to call people to Himself. We need Him to take the bold words that we say to others and cause them to penetrate to the heart and be received as the words of God. We need God to convict people of their sins. We need God to convert people.

In chapter 10, we see a similar miraculous circumstance take place, which brought the gospel to the Gentiles. God was working to build His church. At the beginning of the chapter, we are introduced to a man named Cornelius, a devout man who feared God (10:2). He gave alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually (10:2). God appeared to him and said, ...

> Acts 10:3-6
> Cornelius, ... Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea."

Cornelius then sent some men to see Saul. While they were on the way to find Peter's house, Peter was on the rooftop praying. Peter had a dream in which was told to eat food that was unclean according to the law. Three times he was asked to eat of this food. Three times he refused to eat. Finally, the Spirit said to him, ...

> Acts 10:19-20
> "Behold, three men are looking for you. But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself."

This is clearly God doing His work to build His church. How else can you explain two simultaneous visions that coordinate so perfectly with each other? There was a vision to Cornelius and a vision to Peter. These visions were the means through which God brought the gospel to the Gentiles, who believed and came into the church. We need God. Finally, ...

7. We need prayer (Acts 12).

We see this in chapter 12. In verse 2, we read that Herod put James to death with the sword. James was a leader of the church. "When [Herod] saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also." The plan was to kill Peter. Soon afterwards, Herod had seized him and taken him into prison. When the people heard about his troubles, they gathered together for prayer. "Prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God" (verse 5). They were earnestly praying. I trust that if I were in prison, soon to be executed, that the people of Rock Valley Bible Church would be praying for me as well.

As they were praying, Peter was miraculously released from prison. An came into the prison, woke Peter up and brought him outside of the prison. When Peter came to himself, he went to the house of Mary, where many were gathered together and were praying (verses 11-12). How he knew that everyone would be gathered there at the house, I don't know. But, that's where he went.

At this point, there is a funny story. A servant-girl, named Rhoda came to the door when she heard the knock. When she saw that it was Peter, she was so excited that she forgot to unlock the door, but rather reported to everyone that Peter was in the front of the gate (verse 14). Those who were gathered for prayer thought that she was out of her mind! (verse 15). Couldn't Rhoda see that they were praying for Peter's release?

When Peter came into their midst, he explained how the Lord had led him out of prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren. Then he left and went to another place" (verse 17), probably for safety purposes.

We need prayer at Rock Valley Bible Church. Just think about the points of my message this morning. (1) We need the Holy Spirit. We need God to work. (2) We need each other. We need a body, a community. (3) We need Jesus. He is the center of everything. (4) We need servants. We need them to serve one another. (5) We need boldness to tell others of Christ. (6) We need God to work to bring sinners to conviction of their sin and a knowledge of God. Of course, it is only natural here that (7) we need prayer. We need to pray to Got that He would work in our midst.

As an application, I would encourage you all to come to our prayer meeting. All are invited. The great reality is that few show up. My heart is for the entire church to attend this meeting. Come and pray. We need prayer. We need to plead that God would come and work in our midst.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 6, 2009 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

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[1] J. Oswald Sanders, Spiritual Leadership, p. 50.