



ACTS

.....

MICHAEL KASTING

LIVING WAY
BIBLE STUDY

Living Way Bible Study, Inc. (LWBS) is an auxiliary of the Pacific Southwest District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). All studies are written and/or edited by LCMS pastors. We have been providing studies to churches throughout the U.S. and Canada since 1982.

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WELCOME TO LIVING WAY BIBLE STUDY (LWBS)

LWBS is a practical course of study with a special emphasis on the application of God's Word to the life of the individual. While emphasizing practical application, LWBS presents each book of the Bible as the holy, inspired Word of God, the confessional position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Our purpose is to help equip believers to live joyfully in God's redeeming love and to share with others God's plan of salvation.

It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit will use this study to help you grow in your knowledge and appreciation of our God and His Word. *"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"* 2 Peter 3:18.

STUDY STRUCTURE

LIVING WAY BIBLE STUDY SUGGESTS THIS FOUR-STEP METHOD

- 1. PERSONAL* – The student prays for guidance from the Holy Spirit and answers the Personal Application (P.A.) questions at home using only the Bible (no commentaries).
- 2. SMALL GROUPS* – The class meets for an opening and divides into small groups of 8–10 people. The small group leader guides the group through the P.A. questions, encouraging each to share their answers and discuss further as time allows.
- 3. THE MESSAGE* – The lecture or message is given by a pastor or layperson who has researched the material and presents the study, giving personal insight and augmenting, but not duplicating, the author's comments.
- 4. THE NARRATIVE* – The author's comments or narrative, along with the P.A. questions for the next lesson, are given out at the end of the class. At the next class meeting, before answering the P.A. questions, the small groups may choose to review the author's comments of the last lesson, and share what each has highlighted as meaningful or important.

With this four-step method the student has the opportunity to study the particular section of Scripture covered by the lesson from four different approaches. This emphasizes the Bible text and gives the student an understanding and ownership for each section studied.

Each lesson should be stapled together according to the number of the lesson in the right-hand corner of the page. The P.A. questions for the next week should be attached after the author's narrative for the current week, as they will be the home study for the next class session.

The first meeting of the class is an introduction to the study. Since the members of the small groups have no P.A. questions to discuss at the first meeting, they may use the time to get acquainted or to tell what they hope to receive by studying this course. At the first meeting, the lecturer presents background information about the course, using the Introduction lesson as a guide.

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ACTS

MICHAEL KASTING

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Faith, Sequim, WA

Trinity, Oregon City, OR

Trinity, Casey, IL

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Time and Grace – A Pastor's Story, 2012

Blood and Life – Sermons on the Old Testament, 2013

Through the Needle's Eye: Sermons on the Gospels, 2016

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Barclay offers brief but insightful notes on the text of Acts, especially the historical background of people and places.

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A wonderful historical background of the Book of Acts with pictures, quotes, and many a wise observation.

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INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

“Most Excellent Theophilus”



THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

The story of Jesus Christ is “the greatest story ever told.” That was the title of a 1949 book by Fulton Oursler, later made into a movie. The story is “the greatest,” not only because it has everything a good story needs (important premise, engaging plot, fascinating characters, sharp conflict), and not only because it is true, but because it has impacted and still impacts this world as no other story has done. Those who hear it realize that they are invited in, for it keeps going and growing! At the end of his Narnia series, C. S. Lewis calls it the “Great Story... which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before” (*The Last Battle*, p. 184).

The story of Jesus and the movement He began was shared already long ago by the Evangelist Luke in two parts: the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The former narrates “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). The latter continues by telling what the risen and ascended Jesus did through some of His key followers, particularly Peter and Paul, in the decades afterward. The story was long enough that the author recorded it on two scrolls, each about 25–30 feet long. Unfortunately, the scrolls circulated separately, and when they were finally included in the New Testament canon, the insertion of John’s Gospel divided them “unnaturally” (observes Robert Smith). The result has been that some readers do not realize these two books are really one book in two parts.

“MOST EXCELLENT THEOPHILUS”

The two parts of Luke’s story are tied together by the name Theophilus. Each part begins with a formal preface, the kind that was common to historical works of that time. In each one the author states his purpose in writing and identifies Theophilus as the recipient. “Theophilus” means “one who loves God.” It’s possible that the name refers to the readers of the story who love God enough to ponder and accept the message. But more likely it’s the name of one particular man.

The designation “most excellent” (Luke 1:3) may indicate that the recipient was a Roman official. Some commentators assert that Luke is making the case before Rome that Jesus and His followers were innocent of wrong, that they posed no danger of insurrection and had no political agenda. It may, others suggest, be the name of a wealthy patron, “responsible for seeing that [Luke’s] writings were copied and distributed. Such a dedication to the publisher was common at that time” (*Concordia Self-Study Bible*).

LUKE — AN AUTHOR WITH A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

How can we be sure that Luke is the writer? Nowhere in either book does he identify himself by name. But there are clues. He must be a companion of Paul on those mission journeys, for beginning at Acts 16:10 come the well-known “we” sections, indicating that the author was a participant in the mission team. Members of that team are named in Colossians 4:10–

14, which was written from Rome toward the end of Paul’s career. They include Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus, all Jewish Christians. Demas, Epaphras, and Luke are three Gentile Christians also with Paul at the time. Luke and four of the others are mentioned again in Philemon (v. 24), which was written about the same time as Colossians.

Another clue is that Luke and Acts are written in elegant Greek with fastidiously accurate historical details, the mark of an educated man. A “doctor” (so Paul identifies Luke in Col. 4:14) would be such an educated man. That label also helps explain the mention of various ailments and cures in Luke/Acts, as well as a marked compassion for the poor, the sick, and the lowly so evident in its pages.

The clearly dominant interest in the outreach to Gentiles in Luke/Acts (as we’ll see in this study) also fits an author who is himself a Gentile. As the only Gentile author in the New Testament, Luke brings a unique perspective on the Church’s early years and its struggle to bridge the gap between Jews and Gentiles.

The earliest recorded attribution of both “books” to Luke is in the Muratorian Canon (about AD 170). The early historian Eusebius (AD 325) lists information from several places to identify the author as Luke. Luke’s role as author remains the consensus choice among scholars to the present day.

THE OUTLINE OF ACTS

The story in Acts has an astonishing array of events, including

- a young man falling asleep during a sermon
- an earthquake that rocks a jail and frees the prisoners
- a rooftop vision of animals in a sheet
- missionaries mistaken for gods, then later stoned by the same crowd
- a hero who survives a shipwreck, then a poisonous snakebite
- a crazed and pompous king struck down by God

and much more. But amid all these seemingly random happenings in Acts, there is a steady thread of purpose, a predicted order of events that holds the book together and serves as an outline for the history it records.

The geographic heart of Luke is the journey of Jesus that ends in Jerusalem. The geographic heart of Acts is the journey of His message from Jerusalem to Rome, an unmistakable indicator of the spread of the Gospel from Jews to Gentiles. Acts can be very simply divided into two halves, according to the *Concordia Self-Study Bible*:

- a) Peter and the beginnings of the Church in Palestine (Acts 1–12)
- b) Paul and the expansion of the Church from Antioch to Rome (Acts 13–28)

Others prefer to divide the book into three sections. How so? The cue is in 1:8. There, just before His ascension into heaven, Jesus tells the eleven apostles, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” There in a single verse is an outline of Acts, the Spirit-powered propulsion of the Gospel of Jesus from Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish world, to the

“end of the earth,” namely Rome, the capital of the Gentile world. In a single generation after its launch, the message of Jesus the Savior travels 1500 miles, an impressive accomplishment in a world without telephones or automobiles!

The threefold outline (Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the “end of the earth”) is reinforced by repeated Pentecostal outpourings of the Holy Spirit on successive new “people groups.” There is Pentecost Day in Jerusalem (Chapter 2), the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the 120 Jewish believers. Later the Samaritans believe the preached message of Philip and receive the Holy Spirit at the hands of Peter and John (Chapter 8). Finally even the Gentiles in Cornelius’s house receive the Holy Spirit (Chapter 10), and the words of Jesus come to pass in dramatic fashion. After the story of the Gentile outreach in Paul’s mission journeys, the book climaxes with Paul preaching the Gospel freely in Rome. “How about that!” Luke seems to say.

Although the Gospel message spreads like the ripples in a pond to a wider and wider circle of people, Jerusalem is never really left behind. Each time a new boundary is crossed, the story bounces us back to Jerusalem before rebounding farther and farther away. Robert Smith describes it in geometric terms: “It is not accurate to say that the old sacred circle with Jerusalem as its center was finally replaced by a new circle with its center in Rome. Rather the old circle has been stretched into an ellipse” (*Acts*, p. 17).

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTS

While we have four canonical accounts of the earthly life of Jesus, we have only one of the early years of the Church. The story of the spread of the Gospel in spite of internal struggles (the neglect of the Greek widows, the dispute about what to do with Gentiles) and threats from outside (Jewish resistance, the Herodian persecution, demonic opposition) is crucial for understanding the way

We need what this book brings! We need to learn again what it means to be a follower of “The Way” in our worldly culture. These are the “last days,” and the Holy Spirit is still stirring the hearts of people like us.



God chooses to guide His Church, even now. For there are many who say that our secular and increasingly hostile culture is resembling those times more and more. While we cannot simply replicate the Early Church, there is much to learn from it.

Luke explained to Theophilus that he intended to provide an “orderly account” of the story of Jesus and the Church (Luke 1:3–4) so that readers might have certainty. As one of the few direct accounts of the life of the Early Church, Acts provides a historical grid of dates and places that enables us to understand the chronology of Paul’s letters in particular. Archeological findings have repeatedly demonstrated Luke’s accuracy as a historian and his use of proper terminology from that time. We find certainty and assurance in his remarkable record.

For two thousand years the Book of Acts has provided countless generations the experience Walter Cronkite once called “You Are There.” The anecdotes bring us to the edge of our chairs. The speeches allow us to eavesdrop on those early Christian preachers and teachers as if we sat at their feet. The book becomes not merely something one reads but something one experiences.

In 2006, this writer and his wife went to Kyrgyzstan for a month-long short-term mission. While there we listened to a “pentecostal” array of languages. We taught without notes, following the missionary’s instruction to “let the Holy Spirit tell you what to say” (and He did!). We witnessed opposition from husbands who forced their wives to leave our gatherings, and we heard the dreadful story of the lynching of a teen boy, the son of the first convert to Christianity in his Muslim village. We met a woman who spoke of demons disturbing her sleep, and watched as the missionary team prayed over her. Two weeks later she exulted that the demons had left her. When we came back home, we told people, “It felt as if we were living in the Book of Acts.”

It’s that kind of book. The kind one “lives in,” even while sitting at the kitchen table. We’ll take a journey there together for the next few months. Live there. Listen. Watch. We need what this book brings! We need to learn again what it means to be a follower of “The Way” in our worldly culture. These are the “last days,” and the Holy Spirit is still stirring the hearts of people like us.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 1:1-26

Holy Spirit, You inspired Luke to write this book. Come and help me as I read it. Inspire and equip me to be not merely a bystander, but a participant in Your mighty rescue mission. I ask this in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.

Review

1. Share with your small group your level of familiarity with Acts before you began this study.

2. What did you learn about the “geographic outline” of the book?

Acts 1:1–11

3. Luke says that his former book (Gospel of Luke) was about “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (v. 1). What does that phrase tell you about the role of Jesus in *this* book?

4. While staying with his apostles during the 40 days after His resurrection, what specific command did Jesus give them? Why was this instruction important?

5. Compare verse 5 with Luke 3:16. Who is the speaker in each place?

What is the difference between John’s baptism and Jesus’ baptism?

6. The apostles ask Jesus a question in v. 6. What do they assume is to happen next? How does Jesus’ answer instruct them?

7. Luke tells the story of the Ascension twice. Read both versions (Luke 24:50–53 and Acts 1:6–11). What is the SAME in each version? What details are unique to each account?

8. Which of these three things would have the biggest impact on you personally:

a) Jesus’ directive in verse 8?

b) Seeing Him lifted up into heaven?

c) The promise of the angels in verse 11?

9. Do you take “you will be my witnesses” in verse 8 as a promise or a command?

10. What holds you back from being a “witness” for Him? Circle your answer.

- a) Lack of knowledge c) Lack of courage e) Nothing...I’m doing it!
 b) Lack of concern d) I don’t know any unbelievers

Acts 1:12–26

11. Whom does Luke identify among the 120 people who waited in that “upper room”? Any surprises? In light of the frequent symbolic use of numbers in the Bible, do you think there might be any possible significance to the number 120?

12. Peter uses Scripture to argue that Judas is to be replaced. Check the footnotes to see what Peter cites and list below.

13. According to Peter, what are the qualifications needed for being an “apostle”? How does he summarize the job description?

Who are the candidates?

14. How did they finally make the selection? Tell what more you learn about this practice in

Joshua 14:2 _____

1 Sam. 14:42 _____

Prov. 16:33 _____

Jonah 1:7 _____

15. How does their method of choosing another leader compare with the way we do this in our congregations today?

Have you ever seen their method employed? _____

What do you see as the advantages or disadvantages of “casting lots”?

Memory verse challenge

As a part of this course, you will be challenged to commit selected verses from Acts to memory. New verses will appear in some lessons. In the others, you will be encouraged to review what you have already learned. In this way, the lessons of this wonderful book will be stored in your mind and heart and provide continued spiritual nourishment. The first verse is written below. Make the effort. You can do it!

ACTS 1:8 “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

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Watching and Waiting



THE NECESSITY OF WAITING

Something that often frustrates our “gotta have it now” culture is the necessity of waiting. In spite of instant coffee, instant messaging, and other speedy resources now available, there are still many things that require the patience to wait for the right time. Farmers must still wait for the ground to be dry enough for planting each spring. The baker must still wait for the dough to rise. No matter how eager they are, prospective parents must still wait the required nine months (or so) for their baby.

The Book of Acts begins with a strict order from Jesus to His followers: **WAIT!** A desperate world needed the message of hope they were to bring, but there was to be no jumping the gun. Indeed, failure would be inevitable unless they waited for one essential resource — the “go power” only the Holy Spirit could provide. For that power they had to wait. Such waiting for the Lord (Ps. 27:14) to provide is no empty exercise, but is in fact the posture faith must adopt as it prays for guidance day by day and looks for the return of Jesus on the last day.

As the wondrous story of the Early Church unfolds, the apostles wait and pray day after day while little seems to happen. While they wait, God works to provision them. Only after Pentecost, only after God supplies what they need, do they begin to “act.” Then the acts of those apostles are something special to behold!

FORTY WONDERFUL DAYS

ACTS 1:1-5

Luke says that his former book (the Gospel of Luke) was about “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (v. 1). But He wasn’t (and isn’t!) finished. The Book of Acts is the record of how Jesus continued to “do and teach” through the words and work of his followers, Peter and Paul in particular. William Barclay tells the story of a Hindu inquirer who undertook to read the New Testament. He was struck by the account in Acts of how the Church continued the work of Jesus. The man voiced a determination: “I must belong to the church that carries on the life of Christ!”

The equipping of those followers began with forty wonderful days of appearances (including those listed in 1 Cor. 15:5-7) and face-to-face instruction about “the kingdom of God.” Forty days may be a precise measure of time, or it may be a round number signifying a long time — time enough to accomplish what was needed. Moses was 40 days on Sinai (Ex. 24:18) and Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness before His temptation (Matt. 4:2).

Forty days was long enough for important things to happen. Important things like a command and a promise. It was during those days that Jesus laid out for them a command coupled with a promise. The command? “Not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait...” (v. 4). The promise? “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (v. 5). This “promise of the Father” was made centuries earlier through the prophet Joel, a promise Peter will quote in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:17ff.).

This gift Jesus described as being “baptized with the Holy Spirit,” in contrast to how “John baptized with water” (v. 5). In his earlier book Luke records John himself saying, “I baptize you with water, but he... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). “Baptize” is often used literally to refer to the washing John administered or to the Christian sacrament, both mentioned in Acts. Here it is a metaphor for the bestowing of the Spirit. “Baptism with the Holy Spirit” is not a reference to a further work of grace that ushers Christians into a higher, more “charismatic” faith life, as if we needed a second baptism! It is always used in the New Testament to describe the whole saving work of Jesus Christ in contrast to the preparatory work of John the Baptist. All Christians who have been incorporated into Christ by Holy Baptism have been “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). The question now is whether or not we will use that gift and “walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16).

But first the disciples had to wait. God’s work could not be undertaken without God’s strength. It is a simple lesson that the contemporary church needs, for we are prone to plunge ahead before we have prayed and waited for the wisdom and strength God would give us. Books, workshops, and seminars have value, but they dare not supplant the prayerful waiting Jesus enjoins upon us all.

THE ASCENSION*ACTS 1:6–11*

Luke is the only one of the Evangelists to record the Ascension of Jesus, and he does it twice. There is a shorter version in Luke 24:50–53 and this slightly longer one in Acts 1:6–11. The contrasting details are interesting:

<i>LUKE 24:50–53</i>	<i>ACTS 1:6–11</i>
<i>Sounds as if it happened Easter evening (“then...”)</i>	<i>It happened after the 40 days of appearances to the disciples</i>
<i>No location specified</i>	<i>Olivet the location (see v. 12)</i>
<i>No words from the disciples</i>	<i>Disciples ask about the kingdom</i>
<i>Jesus “blessed them”</i>	<i>Jesus answers their questions, gives command about being witnesses</i>
<i>“He parted,” and was “carried up into heaven”</i>	<i>He “was lifted up” and a “cloud took him out of their sight”</i>
<i>No angels mentioned</i>	<i>Two angels (“men”) and the promise of His return</i>
<i>Return to Jerusalem/temple</i>	<i>Return to Jerusalem/ “upper room”</i>

The location on Olivet is significant. The prophet Zechariah identified the “Mount of Olives” as the location of key events on the day of the Lord (Zech. 14:4). The Lord’s “feet will stand” there in a climactic battle. Is this prophecy in view when the angels tell the apostles that Jesus will return “in the same way as you saw him go” (v. 11)? Is this prophecy on their minds when they ask about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel? In some fashion, they expect a glorious ending centering on Israel.

But Jesus has a different and far more glorious future in mind, one that is only just beginning at Jerusalem and is then to spread outward like ripples in a pond to “all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (v. 8). Salvation is not for Jews only, but for all the nations, as Acts will make abundantly clear. The apostles themselves are to have a crucial role: “you will be my witnesses”! It’s a command — their marching orders. The promise that attends the command is the coming gift of the Holy Spirit’s power for the mind-boggling task. A second promise, spoken by the angels, will sustain them in the

dark times ahead and buoy them up even in the face of martyrdom: “Jesus...will come” (v. 11). But for now, the angels make clear, they are to stop gawking and get going back to the city. They must stop being bystanders and prepare to be witnesses.

IN ANOTHER UPPER ROOM

ACTS 1:12-14

The eleven apostles make their way back a little more than half a mile into the city. A “Sabbath day’s journey” was a thousand steps, the limit Jews were allowed to walk before their travel became “work” that violated the Sabbath’s rest. There they joined a larger group in “the upper room.” One writer guesses this might be the same room where Jesus met with disciples for the Last Supper, but many dwellings had upper rooms.

Luke gives us a head count for the fledgling movement. There were “about 120” persons, verse 15 tells us. Is there any significance to that number? We moderns are used to the numberings of crowds at sports events or political rallies. Our ushers count and record the number of attendees at church. But the Jews often attended to numbers as vehicles for deeper meanings. The numbers 3, 4, 7, 10, 12, and 40 readily come to mind. But 120? A reasonable guess might factor 120 into 10 x 12. The meanings of 10 (“all of”) and 12 (“God’s people”) would nicely describe the tiny gathering as “all of God’s people” – at least for the moment! But there is another possibility nearer at hand. In Jewish law, 120 is the number of men required before a community could form its council to do the necessary business. Here in the upper room, the necessary business of choosing a successor to Judas is about to take place. If the Jewish understanding of a “community” is in view, it has been broadened to include both men and women, all of whom will soon receive the Holy Spirit. Luke does not explain, and we are left to surmise.

Let’s go further in describing this group. In addition to the 11 remaining apostles, Luke mentions “the women” being among the 120 people in that upper room. With no further detail, we can only guess whether these included some of the apostles’ wives (referred to by Paul in 1 Cor. 9:5), the women who attended the disciple band (listed in Luke 8:2–3) as well as those women who were the earliest witnesses at the empty tomb (Luke 24:22). The group also includes Jesus’ mother and his brothers, who once had opposed Him for being “out of his mind” (Mark 3:21)! All of them are present.

It is, admittedly, a minuscule number. William Barclay points out that there were at Jesus’ time about 4 million Jews. If accurate, this means that only 1 in 30,000 were followers of Jesus! Yet we know what happened, and that alone ought to encourage those of us who fret that small congregations can’t expect to accomplish much. Was there a “secret” to the wondrous things that followed? Only this, Luke reports, that “all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer” (v. 14). Does that describe our congregational gatherings? Have we “devoted” ourselves to prayer, or has praying become a kind of “formal bookend” to those gatherings?

THE SELECTION OF MATTHIAS

ACTS 1:15-26

While they wait and pray, an important matter must be addressed. There is a gap in the circle of apostles. Jesus had deliberately chosen twelve men to mirror the twelve tribes of Israel, for a new covenant and a new Israel had begun. But Judas Iscariot is now dead and there are only eleven. Who would see to this task and make sure the circle was complete? Luke tells us that “Peter stood up among the brothers” (v. 15). Was he remembering the charge laid on him by Jesus at their last supper? “When you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32).

Peter begins by taking them all back to Scripture. The death of Judas and the necessity of his replacement were all predicted long ago, he reminds them. He cites Psalm 69:25, changing the original plural (about “enemies”) to the singular: “May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it” (v. 20). He adds a quote from Psalm 109:8: “Let another take his office.” Judas, Peter alleges, is the particular enemy in view.

Before these Psalm citations comes the grisly account of Judas’ death. Matthew says plainly that after taking the money back to the chief priests, Judas “hanged himself” (Matt. 27:5). It’s a sad but straightforward narrative. Here in Acts, however, the story is more complex. Luke says that “this man acquired a field” (v. 18). We wonder when, since Matthew says he returned the money. Acts might be reconciled with Matthew by saying that Judas made that purchase, in effect, by the agency of the priests (posthumously). Luke adds that somehow Judas “falling headlong... burst open in the middle.” Not the usual outcome of a hanging! We might expect this would happen to someone falling from a great height, as if off a building or a cliff. How this happened remains unclear, but Matthew’s account leaves no doubt it was a suicide.

Now must come the “completion of the apostolic circle” (Haenchen). Peter lists qualifications for the apostolate. The replacement is to be a man. He must be one who had accompanied the disciple band from the day Jesus was baptized at John’s hand (as all the Evangelists narrate) until the day of the Ascension – approximately three years. The job description is utterly simple: to “become with us a witness of [Jesus’] resurrection” (v. 22). That was the way Jesus Himself had summarized the task before them: “you will be my witnesses” (1:8).

There are two candidates put forward — Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. Neither has previously been mentioned in the Gospel records. Neither will be mentioned again after this account. But the selection is included, and it has something to teach us about the way the church operated. First came prayer for the choosing: “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen” (v. 24). Then they “cast lots...and the lot fell on Matthias” (v. 26).

Casting lots normally involved writing the names on stones, placing the stones into a vessel, and shaking the vessel until one of the stones fell out. By this practice tribal inheritances were assigned (Joshua 14:2), as were schedules for Temple singers (1 Chron. 26:13–16). Saul employed it to discover who had disobeyed his orders in a battle (1 Sam. 14:42). The pagan sailors discovered that Jonah was the guilty party behind the storm by casting lots (Jonah 1:7). Proverbs 16:33 affirms that God is at work in this process: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”

Most of our congregational leaders these days are chosen by voting, hopefully after prayer! Curiously, the word “vote” is never mentioned in the Bible, although there is frequent mention of “choosing” or “appointing” (Luke 6:13; Ex. 18:25; Titus 1:5, for example). Would the practice of casting lots (“pulling a name from a hat” or “drawing straws” would be modern equivalents) eliminate the abuses that can come with voting? Might a return to this ancient practice remove the taint of “politicking” from the selection of our leaders? It has happened in more than one LCMS congregation and has been recommended by more than one writer. It’s something worth discussing.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 2:1-47

Lord Jesus Christ, pour out Your Spirit once more on your dispirited and fearful people. Anoint me also as I study and serve, that I may be filled with the joy and power I need for the task You give me. For Your sake, I ask it. Amen.

Review

1. Why do you think Luke chose to narrate the Ascension twice?

2. What did you decide was the significance of the number 120, if any?

Acts 2:1-4

3. Have you ever traveled where you did not speak the language? What happened? How did you feel?

4. Pentecost was one of three major festivals observed by the Jews. What more do you learn about it from

Ex. 23:14-16?

Deut. 16:9-10?

5. Can you think of any reasons why God chose to send His Holy Spirit on this particular day?

6. What do "wind" and "fire" suggest most strongly to you?

_____ Unpredictability

_____ Power

_____ Change

_____ Something else

Acts 2:5-13

7. How does the story here contrast with the one told in Genesis 11:1-8?

8. Use a Bible dictionary, concordance, footnotes, or do an internet search to find out how far away from Jerusalem are the places listed here.

9. "Other tongues" here means human languages they had not previously learned. What other possibility does Paul mention in 1 Cor. 13:1?

Acts 2:14-21

10. Here begins the first sermon in Acts. How many verses are devoted to it? Can you recall a sermon that had a lasting impact on your life? What was it about?

11. Have you ever heard or seen "speaking in tongues" in use? If so, what was your reaction?

12. Peter makes ample use of the Old Testament (remember who the audience is!). The first quote is from Joel 2:28–32. Read it and select three things that have a specially strong link to the Pentecost events.

Why does Peter end the quote where he does?

Acts 2:22–36

13. What do the listeners already know about Jesus? What more does Peter tell them?
-

14. Which gets more stress in this sermon – His death or His resurrection? Why?
-

15. A sermon ought to “afflict the comfortable” and “comfort the afflicted.” How does Peter do these two tasks?
-

Acts 2:37–41

16. An appropriate response to any sermon is “What shall we do?” Have you DONE anything about any of the recent sermons you’ve heard?
-

17. What is Peter’s two-fold answer to their question?
-

What promise does he make?

What was the result?

Acts 2:42–47

18. Here we read the first summary of the life of the Early Church. List the components:
-

19. What do you think made the Early Church so appealing to outsiders?

a) Great preaching b) Miracles c) Their sharing d) Their joy e) Something else

20. What component of the early Christians’ life seems under-used today? How would you like to change things?
-

Memory Challenge

ACTS 2:38–39 “Repent and be baptized every one of you 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 for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” OR

ACTS 2:42 “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”



ACTS

ACTS 2:1-47

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Day of Wind and Fire

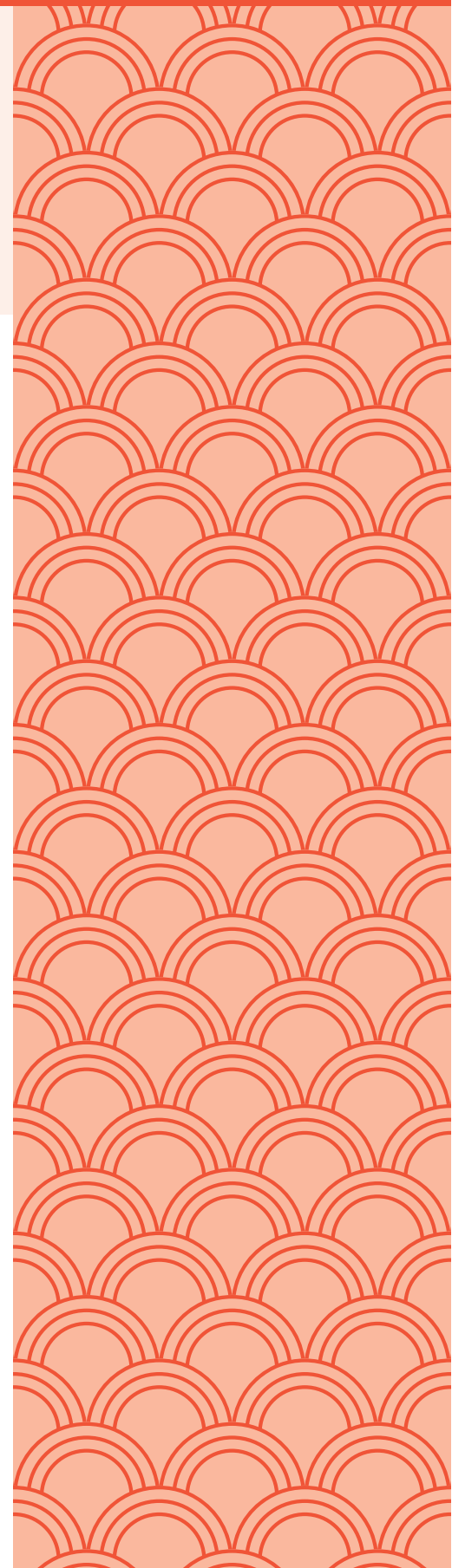


DAYS THAT LIVE IN THE COMMUNAL MEMORY

“Where were you the day the World Trade Center was attacked?” Almost every adult knows the answer to that question. The day known as “9/11” is burned into our communal memory, not only because of the horrific images of jet planes smashing into the twin towers, but because of the realization that “life as we know it” had changed forever. There have been other such days. Older folks will remember November 22, 1963, and a very few will think of that fateful Sunday morning, December 7, 1941.

Not all memorable days are tragic ones. The same oldsters that recall Pearl Harbor will also recall VE Day and VJ Day and the elation brought by the end of World War II. The folks who heard the report of Kennedy’s death in Dallas will also remember Neil Armstrong’s “giant leap for mankind” onto the surface of the moon on July 20, 1969. Communal memory can retain both joyful and sorrowful days, even when the generation that lived through them has passed away. Each kind of day has something important to teach us.

The Book of Acts invites us to relive such a day, a “day of wind and fire” that gave birth to the Christian Church and propelled it across deserts and mountains and oceans with news so good that life as humans had known it would be forever changed. Christians around the world still celebrate “The Feast of Pentecost,” also known as “Whitsun” in the Anglican community.



Just as the Jewish festival signaled the start of the harvest season, so the outpouring of the Spirit this day signaled the start of a great spiritual harvest of people for the kingdom of God through the preaching of the Gospel.



DAY OF WIND AND FIRE

“The day of Pentecost arrived...” (v. 1).

Pentecost was one of three major festivals observed by the Jews:

- Passover (Unleavened Bread) occurred in mid-April.
- Pentecost (Weeks) came on the fiftieth day, a “week of weeks,” after Passover, in our month of June.
- Tabernacles (Booths) is commemorated between late September and late October.

For the Jews the feast had historical significance, for it recalled the giving of the Law on Sinai. It also had agricultural significance for it coincided with the beginning of harvest or “firstfruits” (Ex. 23:16; Num. 28:26). Interestingly, the Jews had a custom of reading the Book of Ruth during the festival, since its story is connected with the grain harvest theme.

For the fledgling Christian movement, it was a day of wind and fire: “Suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house... And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them” (vv. 2–3). Wind and fire are highly evocative. They bespeak the power of God on display. Psalm 29 invites us to witness both at work in nature, as the “voice of the LORD breaks the cedars” (a windstorm) and “flashes forth flames of fire” (lightning). The sound of that wind calls to mind the “blast of the breath of [God’s] nostrils” that drove apart the waters of the Red Sea (2 Sam. 22:16), and the “breath” that came

from the “four winds” to bring life to Israel’s dry bones (Ezek. 37:9–10).

Fire, likewise, was one of the ways God made His presence evident throughout the Old Testament. Moses saw the “flame of fire out of the midst of a bush” at Horeb (Ex. 3:1–3), a fire that did not consume the bush but revealed the place as “holy ground” where God met him, even as the “tongues as of fire” on the heads of the believers did not consume anything but clearly revealed God’s Spirit given to each. Later God would reveal His protective presence in the wilderness by a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21–22) that left no doubt of His presence for those who beheld it. The sound of the wind and the appearance of tongues “as of fire” were an unmistakable sign to the people in that upper room that God was present, endowing them with the power Jesus had earlier promised (1:8).

We are not told why God chose the day of Pentecost rather than some other day. One reason may be that people from near and far converged on Jerusalem for each of the three great feasts — an opportunity for many more lives to be touched (as happened for the eunuch in Chapter 8). Some might also propose that, just as the Jewish festival signaled the start of the harvest season, so the outpouring of the Spirit this day signaled the start of a great spiritual harvest of people for the kingdom of God through the preaching of the Gospel. Later that day, 3000 people heard a Christian sermon and were “harvested” through baptism (2:41). That’s a “firstfruits” of astonishing proportions!

A COSMOPOLITAN GATHERING

ACTS 2:5–13

The people gathered in Jerusalem are not Gentiles. They are “Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven” (2:5). The Gentile outreach is to come later. The plan of God is to start in Jerusalem among the Jews, then branch outward as ripples spread in a pond. Moreover, while we have often pictured these Jews as pilgrims newly arrived in Jerusalem for the festival, that picture may need further examination. The verb used of these Jews in verse 5 is that they were “dwelling” (*katoikountes*) in Jerusalem. The word means to “dwell fixedly,” not merely to “visit,” like the Romans in v. 10 who are “sojourning” for a time (a different verb, *epideemountes*). Many of these people who converge at the strange sounds are probably immigrant Jews born elsewhere who have made their way back to Israel, along with some, like those from Rome, there on pilgrimage for the feast.

Nevertheless, even those immigrants would remember the lands of their birth and marvel to hear the mighty works of God each one “in his own native language (the Greek word is *dialektoo*)” (v. 8). While it is true that the apostles could have communicated the Gospel in Aramaic, which most Jews spoke, or Greek, the common language of the Mediterranean world, it must still have been a thrill to hear the good news in their own language. What was happening here was an epic reversal of the confusion of the languages at Babel in Genesis 11. There God cursed a proud, sinful humanity by making it impossible to understand each other. Here that ancient curse is undone by the Holy Spirit, who bridges the language gulf by enabling the

apostles, “all Galileans” (v. 7), to give voice to their praise of God in every language necessary. Babel’s confusion is replaced by Pentecost’s joyful understanding.

Though Luke says the people there that day represented “every nation under heaven” (v. 5), there are a limited number mentioned. The list goes roughly from east to west. The easterners are “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia” (v. 9). After mention of Judea (the locals), there come peoples from western regions — “Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia” (vv. 9–10). Added to these are southerners from “Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene” and finally, as a capper, “visitors from Rome” (v. 10). Excluding Judea, the list includes twelve places — as if one for each of the twelve apostles! As Luke finishes his list of nations, he mentions “Cretans and Arabians” (v. 11), which probably were not references to individual countries. Robert Smith points out that “Cretans” had come to refer broadly to “westerners” and “Arabians” to “easterners,” a summary of the preceding list of nations.

The phenomenon of speaking in tongues is sometimes labeled “glossolalia,” from the Greek words *glossa* (“tongues”) and *laleo* (“speak”). The languages spoken on that day of wind and fire were identifiable to the cosmopolitan crowd that gathered and had the purpose of proclaiming God’s mighty acts to listeners in their familiar language. The tongue-speaking spoken in Pentecostal gatherings today, listeners observe, does not sound like any known human language and seems more focused on edifying the speaker or expressing praise than in evangelizing others.

It appears, therefore, that “tongue-speaking” may embrace two different kinds of speech. In 1 Cor. 13:1, Paul makes reference to “the tongues of men and of angels.” If there is a “language of the angels,” we are given no further explanation here. There was a Jewish tradition that a rabbi named Johanan ben Zakkai was able to understand angelic speech because of his outstanding piety. A possible hint of angelic speech is the mention in Rev. 14:2–3 of a heavenly song heard by the seer which could only be learned by the redeemed. Whatever the kind of language used, Paul preferred “prophecy” (in plain language!) to tongue-speaking. He therefore urged that “interpretation” accompany glossolalia in Corinth’s worship gatherings (1 Cor. 14:13, 28), though he allowed that speaking in tongues should not be forbidden.

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN SERMON

ACTS 2:14–21

The giving of the Spirit immediately issues in the “witness” Jesus had commanded in 1:8. Peter, as spokesman for the Twelve, preaches the first recorded Christian sermon after the resurrection. While what we read in these 27 verses is doubtless only a summary (“with many other words he bore witness” — v. 40). We get a clear outline of the powerful message we will hear again and again in this book. The components of the message are simple:

- a) the end of history (the “last days”) has come
- b) Scripture has been fulfilled
- c) all this has happened in Jesus and especially His resurrection
- d) God offers salvation — hearers are called to respond.

A Jewish audience needs to know that the message they are hearing is not an invention,

but the outgrowth and fulfillment of all they had heard and read in the prophets, all they had waited for through long centuries. So Peter, starting where the listeners are (wondering about this amazing outburst of speech), explains: “These men are not drunk...this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel” (vv. 15–16). The quotation serves nicely to introduce the first two points:

- a) These are the “last days”!
- b) This excited talk you hear is just what the Scriptures predicted!

A persistent prophetic theme was the “Day of the Lord” (see for example Amos 5:20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:14; Zech. 14:1), a climactic day at the end of the age when God would bring both judgment and deliverance. Joel echoes that familiar refrain (see Joel 2:1, 31), and Peter cites him particularly because Joel speaks of the outpouring of the Spirit in those last days: “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh... sons... daughters... young men... old men... male servants... female servants” (vv. 17–18). What’s new is that this outpouring is not just for a select few charismatic leaders. It will be for *everyone*, regardless of gender, age, or station in life! The “wonders” associated with the end times (“blood, and fire, and vapor... sun...to darkness...moon to blood”) have already begun. There was the darkness at noon on Calvary. This very day there has been wind and fire. The time has come, so listen carefully! Peter purposefully chooses to end the quote mid-verse (Joel 2:32) with the words, “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (v.22). Now he brings them to those next two points in his sermon:

- a) The work of Jesus (He is that “Lord”!)
- b) The summons to respond: “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

PROCLAIMING JESUS: “BOTH LORD AND CHRIST”!

ACTS 2:22-40

If these are the last days, the listeners will want to know, where is the long-awaited Messiah? The heart of Peter’s sermon is his proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth. Some things the crowd already knew: His name, His “mighty works and wonders and signs” that had astonished many and gained a following. The healings, the feedings, the parables that reverberated in many minds, the demons cast out and the dead raised — all these the crowds had heard about, if not seen with their own eyes. Sadly, they also knew of His death and were complicit in it!

It took courage of the highest order for Peter to look them in the eyes and say, “[him] you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (v. 23).

Jesus’ death, however, was not a sign of God’s curse as Deuteronomy 21:23 had once pronounced, but the very “plan and foreknowledge of God” (v. 23). For see what has happened — “This Jesus God raised up” (v. 32)! Lest the hearers dismiss this testimony as some bizarre invention, Peter again cites Scripture. It is the words of King David himself in Psalm 16:8-11 that proclaim the resurrection: “my flesh will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades or let your Holy One see corruption” (vv. 26-27). This cannot refer to David, Peter argues, for “his tomb is with us to this day” (v. 29). Jesus is that “Holy One,” and He is alive. “Of that we are all witnesses”! Peter is doing the apostolic task — bearing witness of the resurrection (1:22). The resurrection of Jesus forms the

constant theme of Christian proclamation in Acts (3:15; 4:10, 33; 5:30-31; 7:55; 10:40; 13:31; 17:18, 31; 23:6; 24:21; 26:23). The resurrection, writes Robert Smith, was more than a resuscitation, for Jesus was “exalted at the right hand of God” (v. 33). His ascension there, which Peter had seen with his own eyes, was also foretold by David in Ps. 110:1.

The inescapable conclusion? “God has made [Jesus] both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (v. 36). Of all the titles ascribed to Jesus by the New Testament, none had more far-reaching implications than “Lord.” That was the honorific title of the Roman emperor — a word that spoke to Jews and Gentiles alike, commanding one’s whole life and allegiance. A second title spoke directly to every Jewish heart. “Christ” (“the anointed one”) is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew “Messiah,” the heir of David who would sit as king on God’s throne and fulfill all His promises. It was a breath-taking proclamation for Jews who had waited centuries to hear this!

The hearers’ reaction is immediate. They ask, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (v. 37). It is the kind of response every preacher prays will result from his message. Peter’s answer is twofold. He combines a command to act, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins,” with a sure promise from God, “and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (v. 38). The enactment of their new-found faith in Jesus Christ is to be baptized, a process that must have taken the rest of that day. Three thousand “souls” are added on this day of wind and fire, a day that would live in the communal memory.

A PROFILE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

ACTS 2:41-47

The Spirit was given. The Gospel was proclaimed in power. The Church was born! It was no flash in the pan. Just as the 120 had “devoted” themselves to prayer, so the new believers “devoted” themselves to their common life. The profile of the early Christian community had four constituent elements: the “teaching” of the apostles, “fellowship” (*koinoonia*), “the breaking of bread,” and “the prayers” (v. 42).

The verses that follow provide a summary look at this shared life. “Fellowship” is not the potluck and chit-chat that so often transpires in the fellowship halls of our contemporary churches. They “had all things in common” (*koinoonia* means “to have a share in”). In view is a selfless sharing of goods so that no one did without. Their “breaking of bread” might simply mean eating together, but came increasingly to refer to the Lord’s Supper (see Acts 20:7 and 1 Cor. 10:16). The joy of the believers was palpable, and they had “favor with all the people” in these early days before serious opposition formed. Daily the Church grew (v. 47).

Those early days of the Church are sometimes looked at with longing by us who live so long afterward. And with good reason. For those fledgling believers, the Christian life was a feast of praise enjoyed “day by day, attending the temple together” and the table fellowship “in their homes.” For too many of us it has shriveled into an hour a week in what our Roman Catholic neighbors sometimes called a “day of obligation.” There seems little joy and even less growth.

Reading about this day of wind and fire, listening again to Peter’s sermon, we are summoned to have a new look at our own life together. We are called to a new “devotion” to learning, to sharing, to communing, to prayer that girds the fabric of our communal life. Where are we weak? Where do we need renewal? Let us take up Luther’s Pentecost hymn as our heart-felt prayer:

*Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord, with all Your graces now outpoured
On each believer’s mind and heart; Your fervent love to them impart.
Lord, by the brightness of Your light in holy faith Your Church unite;
From every land and every tongue, this to Your praise,
O Lord, our God, be sung:
Alleluia, alleluia!*

LSB #497, ST. 1

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 3:1-26

Lord, by Your mercy I am a beggar healed, a sinner saved. Let my study of Your Word today reflect what You have done for me and help me reflect You in all I do and say. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Review

1. What did you learn about the significance and observation of Pentecost among the Jews?

2. How would you sum up the difference between the meanings of "Lord" and "Christ"?

3. Review the components of the early church's life together. In which of these do you think our contemporary church could be strengthened?

Acts 3:1-10

4. As the crippled beggar, what would you write as a diary entry for a typical day? After the encounter with Peter and John?

5. Peter and John used to be part of a trio. Who's missing? _____
What do these two do together in 8:14?

6. How does Luke identify the time of day in v. 1? What hour would this be on our clocks? Compare this with the time reference in 2:15.

7. In 2:22 Peter spoke of the "signs and wonders" done in Jesus' life. What does Jesus Himself predict in John 14:12?

8. How is this story the **same** as what Jesus did in the Gospels (see Matt. 9:1-8; John 5:1-8)? How is it **different**?

9. How does today's church participate in this kind of healing work (whether physical or emotional)? Have you ever been part of a healing ministry? If so, what was it like for you?

Acts 3:11–26

10. We come to the second recorded sermon in Acts. Compare it with the sermon recorded in Chapter 2 (Pentecost).

The precipitating event?

The Preacher?

What is said about Jesus?

11. In this sermon, how does Peter speak “the Law”? The “Gospel”?

12. What Old Testament Scriptures are quoted or alluded to? (Check your Bible’s footnotes and cross references.)

13. How would you sum up what this sermon says about becoming a Christian?

14. Describe a time when repentance brought “times of refreshment” to you. If you feel comfortable doing so, share it with the others in your group.

Memory Challenge

Review what you have learned thus far.



ACTS

ACTS 3:1–26

“IN THE NAME OF JESUS...WALK!” – ACTS 3:1–10	23
JESUS IS THE MESSIAH AND THE PROPHET LIKE MOSES ACTS 3:11–26	24
INVITATION TO REPENTANCE AND REFRESHMENT ACTS 3:17–26	25
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In the Name of Jesus



A NAME TO USE

Names are handles by which we make connections. “What’s your name?” is one of the first questions we ask as we form a relationship. If I know your name, I can get ahold of you. A business card with an individual or company name is an invitation to call that name for help.

Ancient people took names even more seriously than we do. The name was inseparable from the person and his power. When the patriarch Jacob wrestled a powerful, but unknown stranger at the ford of the Jabbok, each asked the other’s name. Jacob wanted a blessing from his divine opponent. When asked “What is your name?” Jacob declared it. The stranger, on the other hand, refused to reveal his identity, though Jacob guessed it (“I have seen God”). Though He did not disclose His “whole self,” the stranger gave Jacob both a blessing and a new name — Israel (Gen. 32:24–30).

Jesus made it clear that He wanted His name to be used by His followers. He promised, “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do” (John 14:13). Not only His power, but His very presence would be available through His name: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt. 18:20). For that reason we begin our worship gatherings in His name, and we rejoice that His “whole self” is present with us. We often end our prayers “in Jesus’ name,” confident that He will hear and help. “All hail the power of Jesus’ name!”

At the beginning of Acts, Jesus ascends into heaven, but the apostles have His name. It is more than His business card. Here in Chapter 3 it is the means by which Jesus continues the healing, saving work He “began to do” (1:1) in the Gospel of Luke, as Peter explains to the astonished onlookers at a healing. Jesus Himself is there and at work as the apostles use His name.

“IN THE NAME OF JESUS...WALK!”

ACTS 3:1-10

Jesus had promised the Twelve that “whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do” (John 14:12). This chapter reads like a fulfillment of those words. The individual who dominates the first twelve chapters of Acts is Peter, the spokesman on Pentecost. Here we see him paired with John, the “disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23). In the Gospels they had been a trio with John’s brother James, although once Jesus sent the two, Peter and John, to prepare the Passover meal in that first upper room (Luke 22:8). But James plays no role in Acts and meets an early death at the hands of Herod (12:2). Surprisingly, no others of the Twelve are even mentioned in the whole of Acts!

The drama in Chapter 3 began on what seemed an ordinary day. The two apostles made the short journey they had taken countless times before: “Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer” (v. 1). It was three o’clock in the afternoon, the appointed time for observant Jews to walk to the temple for prayers. It was also the time when the Levites began making preparation for the “evening sacrifice” of a lamb (Ex. 29:39), which would be offered at twilight.

They approached the “Beautiful Gate,” otherwise known as the Nicanor Gate, at the east entrance between the court of the Gentiles and the court of the women. There they had an encounter like some of us have at intersections and freeway exits in our day. They met a man begging for money. The temple was a natural place for beggars to position themselves, for almsgiving was a religious act the Law of Moses decreed was incumbent on pious Jews (Deut. 15:11). Jesus Himself had reminded them shortly before His death, “you always have the poor with you” (Matt. 26:11).

The appearance of a man “lame from birth,” carried there by friends, reminds us of similar encounters in the gospels. In his account, Luke records the day a paralytic was lowered through the roof to Jesus by his friends and healed (Luke 5:18–26). John Himself narrates the healing of an invalid in Jerusalem at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1–8). In those stories the invalids’ appearance is a kind of “interruption.” In Luke 5, Jesus was busy teaching. In John 5, He is on His way to keep a festival in Jerusalem. Here in Acts 3, Peter and John are on their way to prayers. In every case, the lame man receives individual attention and a brief conversation. In each story, there finally comes a command. “Rise, pick up your bed and go home” (Luke 5:24). “Get up, take up your bed, and walk” (John 5:8). Now it is Peter’s turn to speak the healing words.

But there is one significant difference. Peter uses the name of Jesus. “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” (v. 6). The words are accompanied by a simple act of the apostle. “He took him by the right hand and raised him up” (v. 7), a particularly personal gesture of loving care. Was he remembering the day Jesus had administered such a touch to Peter’s own mother-in-law (Matt. 8:15)? Could he still see in his mind’s eye the moment when Jesus reached out and took the hand of Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:37–42, a miracle witnessed by Peter, James, and John)? Whether consciously or not, Peter is doing what Jesus had done. The ministry of Jesus was continuing through him, with the same result: “Immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God” (vv. 7–8). The healing of the lame is evidence of God’s action to deliver His people (Is. 35), a sign of the arrival of the Messiah Jesus quotes to John the Baptist’s disciples (Luke 7:22).

The story reminds us powerfully that the ministry of the risen Lord continues now in our own time. The Church still meets the poor, the blind, the lame, and the disheartened. Those meetings, while they sometimes feel like “interruptions,” are opportunities for us to say and do love. The Church is still the hands and voice of Jesus bringing healing that is physical, emotional, and spiritual. It may happen in a hospital emergency room under the hand of a skilled surgeon. It may happen in a home setting through the calm voice of a Stephen minister, the anointing oil administered by an elder, or the listening ear of a pastor. We are in a world full of people who need healing. We still have the name of Jesus, and He still touches them through us, does He not?

JESUS IS THE MESSIAH AND THE PROPHET LIKE MOSES

ACTS 3:11-26

The healing of the lame man had an immediate impact. The man once bed-ridden began “walking and leaping and praising God” through the gate into the temple court (v. 8). To see this familiar beggar now fairly dancing for joy electrified the onlookers: “they were filled with wonder and amazement” (v. 10). As happened on Pentecost, a mind-boggling event gets the crowd’s attention and leads directly into an inspired speech by Peter. When they came running, he seized the moment to bear witness to the power of the risen Christ. The final 15 verses of Chapter 3 summarize this second Christian sermon.

The sermon’s setting is Solomon’s Colonnade, an elaborate porch on the east end of the temple complex, graced with 27-foot stone columns and a roof of cedar beams. Jesus Himself had come to the very spot during the Feast of Dedication and spoken to a crowd about His identity as Messiah and Son of God (John 10:22-39), an incident that nearly got him arrested. Now Peter boldly makes the same claim about Him, with the result that he and John are arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, the same body that condemned Jesus to death. What a dramatic change there has been in Peter, who on that night only months before had three times denied he knew Jesus! Cowardice has become courage.

What Peter said on Pentecost he now repeats. The story of Jesus has followed a simple dramatic sequence, as laid out in both sermons:

IN ACTS 2

“you crucified and killed [Him]” (v. 23)

“God raised him up” (v. 24)

“of that we all are witnesses” (v. 32)

IN ACTS 3

“you killed the Author of life” (v. 15)

“God raised from the dead” (v. 15)

“To this we are witnesses” (v. 15)

The breath-taking summary in both places is that Jesus is the Jews' long-awaited Messiah (Greek "Christ"). "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (2:36). Here again Peter proclaims Jesus' true identity: "What God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled" (3:18). This time he adds a wondrous promise, that one day God will "send the Christ appointed for you" (v. 20).

Here as earlier, Scripture is again utilized to buttress the preacher's claims. At Pentecost, two lengthy citations of prophetic words explained the disciples' tongue-speaking and the certain necessity of the resurrection of Jesus. Here again Peter uses two quotes, albeit shorter ones. He cites Deuteronomy 18:15, where Moses promises the people a "prophet like me," and commands them to "listen to him" (vv. 22–23). He also reminds the listeners of their own identity as "sons of . . . the covenant" (Hebrew for "sons of the covenant" is *b'nai berith*) as he quotes Genesis 12:3, the original covenant promise to Abraham.

It is striking that the word "prophet" (or "prophets") occurs six times in nine verses. The two uses of the word in the singular (from the Deut. 18 quote) refer to Jesus Himself. The four plural references denote the Old Testament prophets, who as a body bear a witness to the Gospel. Peter here simply alludes to the prophetic witness, but the prophet Isaiah later becomes the subject of discussion between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (8:32–35). In these early years of the church, Christian preachers became adept at using the Old Testament to preach the Gospel, a skill that pastors today would do well to recall.

INVITATION TO REPENTANCE AND REFRESHMENT

ACTS 3:17–26

A good sermon "afflicts the comfortable" (the Law) and then "comforts the afflicted" (the Gospel). Peter has indicted the listeners for the murder of "the Author of life" (v. 15). Now he begins to offer them the Gospel's comfort. He points to the healing of the lame man as Exhibit A. Do you see, he asks the crowd, what the

name of Jesus has granted to one who trusted in Him? "Perfect health in the presence of you all" (v. 16). What this man received you can have too!

As if already anticipating their acceptance of his message, Peter calls them "brothers" who "acted in ignorance" (v. 17). Peter has the same spirit as Jesus, who on the cross prayed forgiveness for his killers: "forgive them, for they know not what they do" (a prayer recorded only by Luke in 23:34!). The forgiveness Jesus asked for is now offered by Peter to his hearers: "Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (vv. 19–20).

Jesus, he tells them, is not physically among us, but in heaven, "until the time for restoring" (v. 21). The Greek word translated "restoring" is *apokatastasis*, a technical term describing the re-creation of conditions in Paradise Eden, the same word the disciples had used in 1:6 when they asked Jesus, "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Ah, not yet! There is work to be done, a life-giving message to preach, a "turning" from wickedness (v. 26) that will allow many to be what God intended them to be — "sons . . . of the covenant" (v. 25). There is a world to be won. Then at last the Christ will return (v. 20).

The preaching we see in Acts became the pattern for Christian sermons in the centuries that followed. The honest confrontation of sin, the command to repent, the proclamation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the offer of forgiveness all have roots here as the apostles obeyed the command of Jesus they heard before His ascension "that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:47).

Peter's sermon that day, as on Pentecost, had a profound impact. "Many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of men came to about five thousand" (4:4). The name of Jesus brought blessing to those who believed. As we shall soon see in our next lesson, it also aroused hostility.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 4:1-37

Sovereign Lord, bless the study of Your Word I now undertake. Make me a willing witness, and enable me to face hostility with boldness and good cheer. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit and the joy He gives! In Jesus' name. Amen.

Review

1. What discoveries have you made in the first four lessons of this course?

2. List the recurring emphases in Peter's first two sermons in Acts.

Acts 4:1-12

3. What's the toughest thing that ever happened to you because of your faith?

4. Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin. What familiar leaders are in attendance? Review John 18:19-24 and Matt. 26:57-68. How would you characterize their treatment of Jesus?

5. With what question does the interview of Peter and John begin? Are they seeking information or trying to intimidate the apostles?

6. Peter is "filled with the Holy Spirit" (v. 8). When are you most aware of the Holy Spirit in you?

a) In church

c) Speaking to others about Jesus

e) While singing

b) Reading the Bible

d) In prayer

f) I'm never aware of the Spirit in my life

7. What part of his sermon at the temple does Peter repeat? What passage of Scripture does he cite? In Matt. 21:42-46, Jesus uses the same quote. To whom? What reaction does he get?

Acts 4:13-22

8. What quality of character did the authorities observe in Peter and John? What do they see has produced it?

9. Why does it matter that the lame man now healed is in attendance (v. 14)?

10. The authorities admit that a "notable sign" has been performed, but they remain opposed to Jesus and His message. Is there someone you know who exhibits stubborn opposition like this? Was there a time when you did?

11. Compare vv. 19–20 with 5:29. Can you think of situations in our day when Christians have been confronted with the option of disobeying the authorities because of their spiritual convictions? Have you faced such a situation?

Acts 4:23–31

12. Upon the return of the apostles, the group's first reaction is to pray, unlike the Sanhedrin, which chooses to "confer" with one another (v. 15). When we, as families or congregations, face some thorny issue, what's our first reaction?

13. Compare the believers' prayer in this section to Hezekiah's prayer in Is. 37:14–20. List the similarities. Any significant differences?

14. What Scripture do they cite in the prayer? How does it relate to the issue they face?

15. What did they ask for themselves? What might we ask in the same circumstances? How is the prayer answered?

Acts 4:32–37

16. The believers were "of one heart and soul" (v. 32). With what sort of group have you had the greatest sense of unity?

17. How does the description of the church's life together in these verses compare to the description in 2:42–47? What is stressed here?

18. Who is "Barnabas"? Does anything surprise you about his description?

19. Is there anything in this chapter you feel today's church needs particularly to heed?

Memory Challenge

Review what you have learned thus far.



ACTS

ACTS 4:1-37

BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN – ACTS 4:1–7	29
A BOLD WITNESS TO JESUS – ACTS 4:8–12	30
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Threats, Courage, and Community

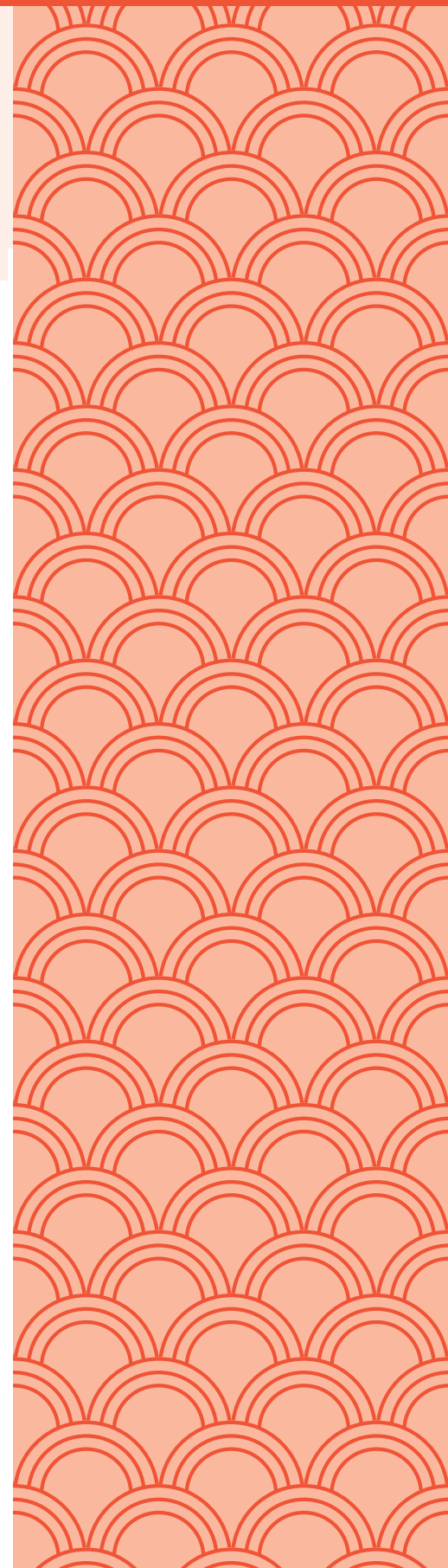


FACING PERSECUTION

The emergence of radical Islam and its jihad against Jews, Christians, and “secular” Muslims has brought persecution out of dusty books of history onto our television screens. Things that happened long ago at the hands of Roman emperors in the arena have been happening again in the Middle East and Africa because of ISIS and other terrorist groups. We read of beheadings, crucifixions, the destruction of churches, and the kidnapping of young women to be used as sex slaves. Sunday prayers in many congregations now include intercessions for God to grant courage to those facing such persecution.

Even in the relative safety of the USA, there are signs of increasing hostility to the church and its message. Political battles over abortion and same-sex marriage, to cite just two examples, have led some political leaders to call for the church to change its message. Employers forbid “religious talk” in the workplace. Schools have replaced Christmas programs with “winter festivals.” Secularists and atheists have become increasingly visible and vocal as they endeavor to counteract what they label as the “oppression” of religion, especially Christianity.

None of this should be surprising to us who follow Christ. He predicted as much at the very beginning when He sent out His disciples. “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake” (Matt. 10:22). Lambs among wolves they would be! He listed persecution among the signs of the end times (Matt. 24:9), and He reminded the apostles of coming threats even on the night of His betrayal in words intended “to keep you from falling away” (John 16:1–2).



The Book of Acts records, alongside stories of the Spirit's power and the infectious joy of the early believers, the birth of opposition that finally grew into deadly persecution. How it happened, and how the believers responded, are lessons to us who live in a culture growing more like the one Acts portrays. How shall we prepare for the resistance we are sure to face? How are we to react when it happens? Those questions begin to find an answer in this lesson, as we see two of the apostles who heard those warnings come face to face with the fearful reality of Jesus' words.

BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

ACTS 4:1-7

Now and then we hear stories of unexpected interruption in the middle of a sermon. Someone in the sanctuary abruptly exits, perhaps with an angry word or gesture. Even worse, there are accounts of intruders barging in to disrupt the worship service or threaten the pastor with harm. In Acts 4, we witness just such a forceful interruption. In the midst of a stirring Gospel sermon before an attentive throng in the temple, Peter and John are confronted by the authorities and arrested. It is only the first shot fired by the opposition in what will become a wider war on the Christian community.

Luke identifies the intruders: "the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees" (v. 1). Though few in number, the Sadducees were wealthy and influential, and from just a few of their families came most of the high priests. They collaborated with the Romans against any potentially disruptive movements in order to keep hold of what they had. Robert Smith estimates the population of Jerusalem at the time was about 30,000. If he is correct, Luke's observation that the Christian movement numbered "about five thousand" (v. 4) shows that the movement was already a sizable and growing threat to the authorities.

The Sadducees were the "traditionalists" of their day who clung to a narrow version of the Jewish faith. They accepted only the books of Moses as authoritative. In opposition to the Pharisees, they denied the resurrection. Luke records that they were "greatly annoyed" at hearing the apostles were proclaiming the resurrection (v. 2). They were, it appears, determined to nip this fledgling movement in the bud.

After a night in custody, Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin the next day. This council, comprised of more than 70 men, was the same body that had sentenced Jesus to death just months before. Peter and John were there on that fateful night. They were the only two of the Twelve to follow Jesus to His trial, and John had actually gone inside the council's chamber with Jesus (John 18:15-16) while Peter dallied outside and finally denied Him (Matt. 26:69-75). For this meeting, all the players make an appearance. Old Annas, who was high priest from AD 6-15, and his son-in-law Caiaphas, who occupied the post from AD 18-36 (after Annas was deposed by the Romans), are in attendance. Jesus had stood before both on the night of His arrest (John 18:12-24).

The Sanhedrin avoids the volatile question of the resurrection (allowing a truce between the Pharisees and Sadducees) and instead begins with questions about the healing of the man lame from birth and the source of their authority for doing it. Knowing very well that the apostles were using Jesus' name, they are intent on intimidating them into silence. But if they imagine that because Peter and John are "uneducated, common men" (v. 13) easily silenced, they are in for a surprise.

A BOLD WITNESS TO JESUS

ACTS 4:8-12

Peter continues to be “filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 8), as he was on Pentecost. The coward who denied his Lord to save himself has been transformed into a fearless witness. For the third time in three chapters, we hear him speak. Though it is the shortest of the three speeches, it is by far the boldest, for it is uttered in the face of his enemies, men who would gladly see him dead.

As he did in Solomon’s Colonnade, Peter begins with the evidence before their eyes. “If we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed...” (v. 9). The issue, Peter well knows, is not the doing of a “good deed,” but the use of “the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” (v. 10). He wastes no time in repeating what he had said to the crowd in the temple, what he had said also on Pentecost. Looking them in the eyes, he makes his witness of Jesus “whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.” The very one this council had thought they got rid of is alive and well and bringing deliverance!

The verb “healed” (Greek *sesoosta*) as Peter uses it of the crippled man is a double-sided word. It can describe deliverance from illness, as it does here. But it is much more often used in the sense of “saved” from sin and death (see, for example, Matt. 10:22; Luke 13:23; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 1:18). Peter himself had used it on Pentecost (“save yourselves from this crooked generation” in 2:40), and now he says it with astonishing courage to the men of the Sanhedrin. “There is salvation (*sooteeria*) in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (*sootheenai*)” (v. 12). The “healing” is just a part of the larger “salvation” Jesus has come to bring!

As part of his witness to Jesus, Peter employs a scriptural picture from Ps. 118:22. “Jesus is

the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone” (v. 11). Was Peter remembering how Jesus had used this same passage as He spoke to the chief priests and Pharisees who confronted Him in these same temple courts (Matt. 21:42-46)? The “cornerstone,” according to Joachim Jeremias, is the finishing-stone of a building, the keystone above the portal. This powerful image appears also in Eph. 2:20, where Paul compares the church to a building (a temple!) built on the prophets and apostles as “foundation” and Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. Jesus is God’s “finishing touch” in the plan of salvation. “And you builders,” he declares to the Sanhedrin, “rejected Him”! With incredible boldness, Peter was taking his life in his hands.

THE CAPTORS COWED

ACTS 4:13-22

The boldness of Peter and John cowed their captors, who found this new spirit astonishing. “They recognized that they had been with Jesus” (v. 13). That brief verse addresses us with an obvious question. When people observe our manner of life and listen to our speech, do they draw the same conclusion? It’s a necessary reminder that the Christian life is far more than attending church! Is that fellowship hour a time of communion with Him, a hearing of His voice? And how can we make the other 167 hours in our week a “being with Jesus” as well?

The council members “had nothing to say” (v. 14) and adjourned to consider their options. They acknowledged the healing as a “notable sign” (cf. 2:42 and John 20:30). Even more awkward for them is the fact that the lame man, now healed, is present too! They are the supreme court for the Jews, and this man is indisputable evidence of the truthfulness of the apostles and the power of Jesus’ name. They cannot contradict what the crowd and they themselves have witnessed. They cannot punish the spokesmen.

One of the striking aspects of the Early Church is their utter reliance on prayer. Upon the return of the apostles, the group's first response is to pray, unlike the Sanhedrin, which chooses to "confer" with one another.



Yet they remain stubbornly opposed to Jesus and His message. "So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (v. 18). What would you do in their place? In the face of this unmistakable threat, the disciples do not flinch: "we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (v. 20). Their refusal to back down guarantees two things. First, there will be future clashes. The very next chapter will record another arrest and confrontation, and still another memorable declaration of their determination (5:29). Second, the message of Jesus will continue to spread. Against such joyful obedience, the "gates of hell" will not prevail (Matt. 16:18)!

THE PRAYER FOR BOLDNESS

ACTS 4:23–31

One of the striking aspects of the Early Church is their utter reliance on prayer. Upon the return of the apostles, the group's first response is to pray, unlike the Sanhedrin, which chooses to "confer" with one another (v. 15). Here again this book addresses our common life as believers. When we face some dark cloud on the horizon, what's our first reaction? Do we pray or call a meeting? When we meet, how important is prayer in our deliberating? Are we willing to pray until we reach a consensus or otherwise perceive God's direction? Crucial questions these!

It is instructive to consider the substance of the believers' prayer. This prayer in the face of danger has at least three similarities to the prayer of King Hezekiah as the Assyrian army besieged Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:14–20). A) Hezekiah's prayer begins by acknowledging God as the God "of all the kingdoms of the earth," the One who "made heaven and earth." B) He requests that God "incline [His] ear" to hear and "open [His] eyes" and see what Sennacherib has done. C) He recounts the impudent action of the enemy, "the words...he has sent to mock the living God," and the powerful way Sennacherib and his predecessors have "laid waste all the nations" and "cast their gods into the fire." The prayer ends with a plea for God to "save us from his hand."

The believers' prayer in Acts 4:24–30 likewise addresses God as the one who "made the heaven and the earth..." (v. 24). As Hezekiah had done, they ask God to "look upon their [the enemies'] threats" (v. 29). Like Hezekiah, they recount the impudence of those enemies, "Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,"

who “gathered together against your holy servant Jesus” (v. 27). Rather than asking rescue, as one would expect, they pray “to speak your word with all boldness” while God continues to work His wonders “through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (v. 30). In one other way, their prayer differs from Hezekiah’s. The believers’ prayer cites Psalm 2, a messianic psalm with special reference to the opposition of “the rulers... against his Anointed” (v. 2). The confident tone of the psalm buoys them as they pray.

What an answer they receive! Luke reports that “the place in which they were gathered... was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (v. 31).

THE CHRISTIANS’ COMMON LIFE

ACTS 4:32-37

With such prayers and such boldness, it is no wonder the Church grew. The chapter ends with a summary of the common life of the early believers not unlike the one at the end of Chapter 2. The believers, Luke observes, were “of one heart and soul.” That attitude led them to share “everything in common” (v. 32).

While the earlier summary mentioned four aspects of their common life (doctrine, fellowship, breaking bread, prayers), this one focuses on the “fellowship” of shared resources. Ernst Haenchen adds an important piece of information about why this was so important. Many Jews came to Jerusalem at the end of their lives to die, he notes. This meant there was an especially large number of widows to care for with no “safety nets” in place like we have today. This helps us understand the need for the “daily distribution” mentioned in 6:1.

The section also serves to introduce us to someone who will be crucially important in the ongoing story. Among the lineup of generous givers in those days there appears one Joseph, whom the apostles nickname “Barnabas” (son of encouragement), a Jewish immigrant from Cyprus, a man of means who “sold a field ... and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (v. 37). The money he donated was an encouragement. Even more encouraging would be the personal support he was to give to Paul. That story will come later.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 5:1–42

Lord God, sooner or later, everyone is tested. As I study about the testing of the Church, remind me that I will also receive such testing. Encourage me and equip me to meet my tests with confident trust in You! In Jesus' name. Amen.

Review

1. Review what you learned about the Sanhedrin and the Sadducees.
2. What are some similarities between the believers' prayer for boldness and Hezekiah's prayer for deliverance?
3. What do you think today's Church needs to learn from Acts 4?

Acts 5:1–11

4. The preceding section (about Barnabas) was a GOOD example of sharing. Now comes a BAD example. It is the first recorded sin in the life of the baby church. What was the sin? What do you think was their motive?
5. In your personal or professional life, what situations most often tempt you to dishonesty?
6. Why such a harsh penalty from God? Compare Achan's sin and punishment (Joshua 7, especially vv. 24–26).
7. If you had been invited to join this community, what would your initial reaction have been?
 - a) Suspicious — sounds too much like socialism
 - b) Sounds like heaven — where do I sign up?
 - c) I have some things I wouldn't sell for anything, so don't ask
 - d) I might try it for a while

Acts 5:12–16

8. What impact did the death of Ananias and Sapphira have?
9. How do you reconcile these seemingly opposite statements:

“None of the rest dared join them” (13) and “More... believers were added” (14)?

Acts 5:17–26

10. How is the experience of the apostles like/unlike that of Jesus, especially with reference to v. 19?

11. What experience have you had with jails? What sights, sounds, or feelings do you associate with them?

12. What now motivates the Sanhedrin to action? (compare with Matt. 27:18)

13. What negative reactions, if any, is the church stirring in our country (or our own community) just now?

Acts 5:27–32

14. What concern is voiced by the high priest (v. 28)? What do you think he means? How do Numbers 35:33 and Matthew 27:24–25 shed light on this?

15. One of the best-known verses in this chapter is “We must obey God rather than men” (v. 29). In what areas do you personally find conflict between what GOD says and what MEN say? What does this say about the issue of civil disobedience?

Acts 5:33–42

16. What can you discover about Gamaliel (v. 34) in a study Bible or via the internet? What do you learn from Acts 22:3?

17. Why does Gamaliel refer to the two earlier failed rebellions?

Do you think he is a “closet Christian”? Why or why not?

18. Verse 41 says the apostles rejoiced after their beating. Why?

19. What, if anything, have you personally suffered because of your faith?

Memory Challenge

ACTS 5:29 *“We must obey God rather than men.”* **OR**

ACTS 5:42 *“Every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.”*

SIGNS AND WONDERS BY THE APOSTLES	
ACTS 5:12-16	37
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The Baby Church is Tested



FACING A TEST

Testing is necessary to measure growth or mastery of a subject or skill. Every student knows that sooner or later he will face a test to see what he’s learned. Coaches schedule games to test the potential of their as yet unproven team. The teachers and the coaches hope those in their charge will do well. Even when school days and sports seasons are over, life will continue to bring tests to each of us. How will we respond? What will the tests reveal that we have learned?

The Book of Acts makes clear that the baby church could not stay in its diapers. The needs of people around it and the growing hostility of those who met it required patience, courage, and a maturity of the believers. God, like a wise teacher, allowed His Church to be tested from within and from outside. Those tests strengthened its resolve to obey the Lord and His commission.

INTERNAL TEST — ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA

ACTS 5:1-11

Chapter five begins with the story of a test from within. The previous chapter ended with the giving of an offering by Barnabas, an example of a generous fellowship that was developing in the believers’ life together. This chapter continues the narrative, but with a “worm in the apple” — the first recorded sin in the Christian fellowship, a test of the young Church’s integrity.

A husband and wife in the community attempt to deceive the leaders. Ananias (not to be confused with his namesake in Damascus in 9:10)

and Sapphira appear to be doing the same thing as Barnabas. Both sell a portion of their property. Both make an offering to help with the needy. But the similarity ends with their motives. The gift Barnabas brought was open-handed and honest. But Ananias and Sapphira give their offering under a pretense. Their sin was not that they didn't give it all ("after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?" Peter asks in v. 4). Instead, they conspired to "keep back" for themselves a part of the sale price and make it appear that they were giving the whole amount (as Peter's question to Sapphira in v. 8 makes clear), possibly to impress others with their commitment.

With startling suddenness and surprising bluntness, Peter confronts Ananias with the deception. This deed, he says, has been prompted by Satan (in Luke 22:3 we read that, in similar fashion, Satan had prompted Judas' betrayal). "You have... lied...to God" (v. 4), he accuses. Instantly, Ananias falls dead at Peter's feet! Three hours later, in almost identical fashion, his wife Sapphira dies suddenly too.

This incident of an improper offering followed by sudden death reminds us of two stories in the Old Testament. In the first, Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, offered "unauthorized fire before the Lord" and were instantly consumed by fire (Lev. 10:1-2). In the second, Achan kept some of the devoted goods of Jericho "for himself" (as here Ananias does). After Joshua asks the "why" question, Achan and his family are executed by stoning (Joshua 7:10-26).

Students through the years have asked why Peter seems so pitiless, why God administers such a harsh penalty for what is, truthfully, a common human failing. One answer might be that what happened in the earliest years of the church would set a precedent. The genuineness of the believers' fellowship was threatened by the sin of Ananias and Sapphira. Their love for money was tantamount to idolatry, as Jesus had made clear ("You cannot serve God and money" — Luke 16:13 and parallels). Ananias and Sapphira are just one couple in a series of reprobates Luke places before his readers who act out of desire for money. The first was Judas (1:18). Later we will hear of Simon (8:18), the owners of the girl who told fortunes (16:16-24), the silversmiths of Ephesus (19:23-27), and Governor Felix (24:26), all of whom are moved by the desire for money.

The message that emerged from this encounter was clear: you dare not put God to the test with lies and deception! The death of Ananias and Sapphira had an immediate impact. "Great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things" (v. 11). This story remains a sobering lesson to us as we consider our common life as congregations. Think about our offerings and their motives. Our small talk in the parking lot. Our decisions to meet or avoid someone in our fellowship. All are occasions where selfishness or deception may manifest itself and our common life be destroyed, as a worm ruins an apple.

SIGNS AND WONDERS BY THE APOSTLES

ACTS 5:12-16

The next test for the baby church would come from outside. Before describing it, Luke inserts a “progress report,” the third such summary in his book (see 2:42–47 and 4:32–37). By telling us that “many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles” (v. 12), he reminds us that the apostles were continuing the wondrous work of Jesus Himself (John 2:11; 20:30). Though all the apostles did wonders, Peter especially manifests an undeniable power to heal. “They even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them” (v. 15). Similar powers will later be ascribed to Paul, whose handkerchiefs and aprons could make people well (19:12). These things remind us of the healings that came through the touching of Jesus’ garments (Mark 5:27; 6:56).

The healings caused a public sensation and spurred a growth in numbers. The contradiction between v. 13 (“none of the rest dared join them”) and v. 14 (“more than ever believers were added to the Lord”) is no contradiction at all. The non-Christians held the Christians in awe and “dared not join,” meaning that they kept a respectful distance and did not presume to attend the gatherings at Solomon’s Portico (the verb for “join” does not refer to becoming believers but to “coming close” to the gatherings there). At the same time many others (“multitudes”) come to faith and become disciples.

The mention of women as converts in v. 14 is one of many positive references to women in both Luke and Acts. Elsewhere Luke paints

compassionate sketches of Lydia (16:13–15), the slave girl (16:16–19), and Priscilla (18:2–3, 18, 26). He also makes passing references to Rhoda (12:13–15) and Damaris (17:34).

Not everyone is happy about this progress report. If the healing of the lame man in Chapter 4 provoked a negative reaction, how much more will come now that the healings are multiplied many times over! Now new hostility erupts.

EXTERNAL TEST — ARREST AND DELIVERANCE

ACTS 5:17-26

The test of the Church from outside takes the form of increasing enmity and opposition by the Jewish authorities. Once again the Sadducees are center stage. More outspokenly hostile than Pharisees, they are consistent opponents of the Church in Acts. As Jesus had been delivered up to Pilate “out of envy” (Matt. 27:18; Mark 15:10), so now the Sadducees are “filled with jealousy” (v. 17) at the manifest ability of the apostles to heal and the success of their appeal to the crowds who flock to hear them. They arrest the apostles and put them in prison.

The apostles were arrested by the authorities out of envy, as was Jesus. But their story takes a different turn with the intervention of “an angel of the Lord” who comes that night, opens the prison doors, and commands them to “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life” (vv. 19–20). Jesus, whose very mission was to die, might have summoned “twelve legions of angels” (Matt. 26:53). But He did not, and there was no angelic rescue. Here the mission of the apostles is to bear witness, and the angel’s rescue enables the continuance of that work.

There has been some scholarly discussion of the angel's identity. Some think the "angel" is simply a human messenger ("angel" means "messenger") who comes to let them out, but v. 23 rules that out. Others wonder if this is "the angel of the Lord" which in the Old Testament is another way of saying God Himself (see Ex. 3:2 and Num. 22:22–35 where "angel of the Lord" and "the LORD" are used interchangeably). Here, however, the article is not "the" but "an."

The story of how they escaped has almost a humorous ring. The officials summon "all the senate of Israel" (v. 21 — another name for the Sanhedrin). They gather in their pomp and send for the prisoners. A while later the officials return red-faced and report, "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside" (v. 23). How very like Easter morning it sounds! Neither grave nor jail can hold them. This is first of three instances where prison doors are miraculously thrown open. Later it will happen individually for Peter (12:6–11) and still later for Paul (16:26). No conventional measures (officers, sentries, doors, and locks) are of any avail in halting the testimony of the witnesses and the Gospel they bring.

Even more embarrassing to them is the arrival of yet another messenger, who says, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" (v. 25). It is a chastened temple captain who finally brings the apostles before the Sanhedrin, "but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people" (v. 26). One can hardly read this without a smile.

"WE MUST OBEY GOD RATHER THAN MEN!"

ACTS 5:27–32

The apostles have passed the initial test by obeying the angelic summons to go and continue preaching despite the council's gag order. Now the screws are tightened further as they stand once more before the men who ordered their silence. The high priest (Caiaphas?) questions them, repeating the order to cease teaching and further charging them with intending to "bring this man's blood upon us" (v. 28, compare Matt. 27:25), a reference to the certainty of divine retribution for murder (Gen. 4:10; Num. 35:33).

But the high priest's portentous words are met with a determined response from Peter and the apostles: "We must obey God rather than men" (v. 29). Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's bold answer to Nebuchadnezzar in the face of a death threat (Dan. 3:18) and Luther's later answer to Charles V at Worms ("I will not recant!"), the apostles pass this stiffer obedience test with the flag of courage flying high. And Peter isn't finished. Once again he repeats the now-familiar summary of the Gospel ("you killed... God exalted him... we are witnesses"). He points to an eye-opening contrast. They had killed Jesus "by hanging him on a tree" (v. 30 — Deut. 21:23 says God's curse rests on one who dies thus). But God had deliberately "exalted" Jesus, undoing the curse and making it clear that Jesus was not cursed, but blessed by God. Boldness again and again!

We are still tested today on the matter of obedience. The words "we must obey God rather than men" have often been cited on the issue of civil disobedience, where there

appears a clear distinction between the directive of civil authorities and the clear command of God. The confessing church in Germany during World War II took a stand like the apostles and faced the wrath of the authorities. Where today do we sense this conflict of duties?

GAMALIEL'S ADVICE

ACTS 5:33–42

The final portion of the chapter introduces a fascinating character named Gamaliel, a Pharisee in the Sanhedrin “held in honor by all the people” (v. 34). Grandson of the great rabbi Hillel, he was the first to be honored with the title “Rabban” (“Our Master”) rather than the ordinary “Rabbi” (“My Master”). We will learn later in Acts that young Saul of Tarsus had been sent to Jerusalem to be educated by this man (22:3). Gamaliel had been nicknamed “The Beauty of the Law,” says William Barclay. At his death, it was said, “Since Rabban Gamaliel died, there has been no more reverence for the Law; and purity and abstinence died out at the same time.”

Gamaliel is cautious, and some would go so far as to say favorable toward the Christians. He counsels the Sanhedrin to be careful about what they do. He reminds them of two earlier rebellions “before these days,” one by Theudas with his 400 men, and one by Judas the Galilean “in the days of the census” (vv. 36–37). In both cases, the leaders died and the followers scattered, bringing the movements to nothing. Here we have another movement, he reasons, whose leader has been killed. “If...this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them” (vv. 38–39). In other words, let God determine the outcome!

The speech of Gamaliel raises a difficulty we must address. Jewish historian Josephus says that Theudas, claiming to be a prophet, led his throng to the Jordan River, which he had promised to part (as Joshua had) and lead his people across dry-shod. The Roman cavalry attacked and killed many, and Theudas was later beheaded. Josephus places the rebellion in the days of Governor Fadus (AD 44–46). The problem is this: if his dating is correct, that rebellion happened ten years or so after Gamaliel’s speech. Judas the Galilean, who Gamaliel says came “after” Theudas, led his rebellion decades earlier “in the days of the census” (v. 37 — almost certainly the census under Quirinius in AD 6). We who take a high view of biblical inspiration propose that Josephus is mistaken, as he sometimes proves to be, and Luke correct, as he has shown to be in many other particulars. William Barclay wonders if there may have been another earlier Theudas (this was a fairly common name).

The council heeds Gamaliel. They administer a beating consisting of 39 lashes (see 2 Cor. 11:24) and repeat the injunction to stop their preaching and teaching. The apostles’ response? They rejoice “that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the [his] name” (v. 41). And they “did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (v. 42). It is a lesson to us, a soft, slightly flabby group of witnesses who may feel we are entitled to special treatment in our world. Less complaining and more rejoicing — that would be a worthwhile outcome when we face testing!

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 6:1–7:60

Lord Jesus, as I study this lesson, give me the same Spirit You gave Stephen. Give me a willing heart, winsome words, and eyes fixed on You. I ask it for Your name's sake! Amen.

Review

1. List some of the ways the experience and work of the apostles paralleled that of Jesus.

2. What did you learn about Gamaliel?

Acts 6:1–7

3. What problem came with the growth of the early Church? How did this problem affect the apostles? What do they say are their priorities?

4. What kind of things divert pastors from those priorities these days?

5. Describe the steps the apostles took to resolve the issue.

6. What were the “job requirements” for the deacons? How do these compare with the requirements we make for church offices today?

7. The task of the Seven was seemingly minor. Why such major attention?

8. Martin Franzmann, former professor at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, identifies six “summarizing statements” scattered through Acts. The first is in 6:7. Take time to read the others he lists – 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, and 28:31. What do you observe about these statements?

Acts 6:8–15

9. What charges are brought against Stephen? Read Matt. 26:61–66. How was Stephen’s experience similar to that of Jesus?

10. How do you suppose Luke got his information about Stephen’s trial and his speech?

Acts 7:1–16

11. What was the longest speech you ever heard? Was it exciting or dull? Why?

12. Here begins a kind of “Reader’s Digest” history of the Old Testament. Where does he choose to begin? In this first part, who is in focus? Why retrace “ancient history”?

13. How does v. 9 especially address the listeners in the Sanhedrin?

Acts 7:17–50

14. In this second part of the speech, who is in focus? How does Stephen answer the charge made against him in 6:14?

15. Stephen has been charged with speaking against “this place” (the temple) and its customs (worship). As his speech draws to a close, he lays the groundwork for a closer look at worship – both idolatrous and genuine. What Scriptures does he quote? What do they say about genuine worship?

Acts 7:51–60

16. See how many parallels between Stephen and Jesus you can identify in this section.

17. Compare v. 56 with Matt. 26:64 and Dan. 7:13–14. Why do you think this statement by Stephen produced such rage?

18. Stephen qualifies as a “hero” in the Early Church. Who would you identify as a hero in today’s church?

19. What name appears for the first time in v. 58? What’s he doing?

20. What chief discoveries are you making about the Book of Acts in these early lessons?

Memory Challenge

ACTS 6:3–4 “Pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”



ACTS

ACTS 6:1–7:60

SOLUTION? SEVEN MAGNIFICENT DEACONS	
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The Magnificent Seven



SEVEN MAGNIFICENT COWBOYS

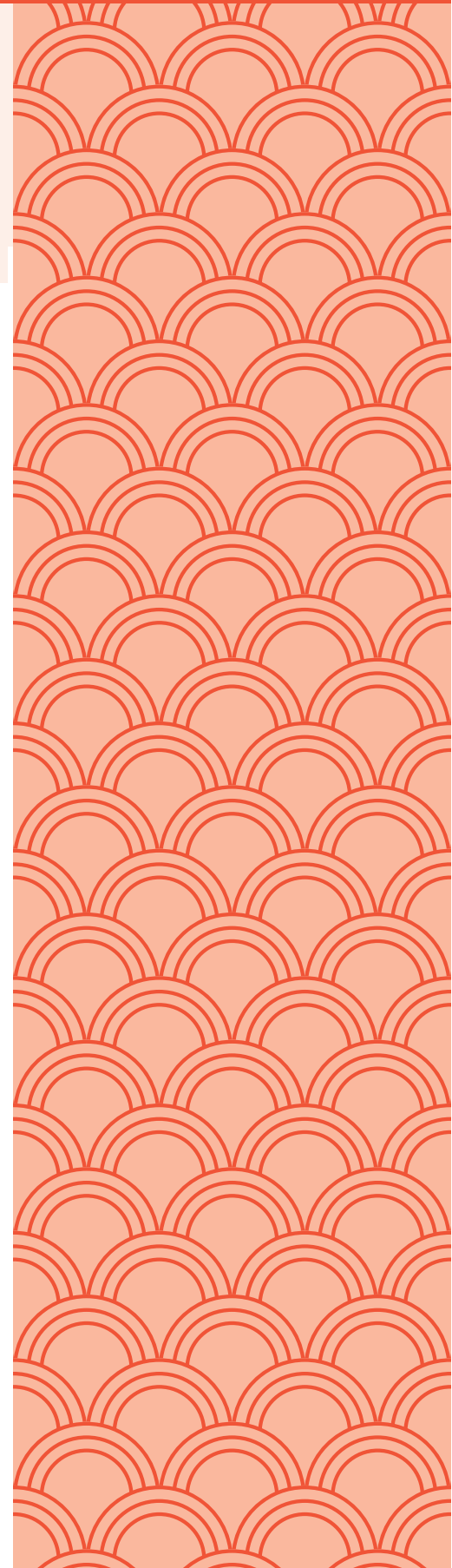
The Magnificent Seven (1960) is a movie about seven cowboys who band together to rescue a poor village oppressed by a gang of thieves who steal their food. Though several of the seven lose their lives, they finally win the day with their guns and courage, and the village is free and well fed again.

The Book of Acts tells a similar story of seven men whose job it is to help some poor widows who are hungry because of being neglected. The group uses not guns but wisdom to make sure the needy ones get fed. Two of these workers go on to more magnificent deeds and one even loses his life. Meanwhile many are helped, and the seven earn a lasting name for themselves alongside the twelve apostles. In this lesson we meet the seven and focus on the one who becomes a magnificent martyr.

NEGLECTED WIDOWS AND NEGLECTED PRIORITIES

ACTS 6:1–2

Luke reports that the Gospel message took hold, and “the disciples were increasing in number” (v. 1). With growth in numbers came the challenge of caring for the widows of the men who moved to Jerusalem in their final years to die in the holy city. The challenge had an additional layer. There were “Hellenist” (Greek-speaking) widows and “Hebrew” widows, and the Hellenists complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.



Hellenism (Greek culture) had arrived more than 300 years earlier with the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). Many Jews were bilingual, speaking Greek as well as their native Aramaic (a variant of Hebrew). This was due in part to the return to Jerusalem of those Jews scattered around the Mediterranean in the Diaspora. The appearance of “Jews...from every nation under heaven” on Pentecost (2:5) is evidence of that.

Before the Church adopted the practice, Jewish synagogues had developed a system for distributing food to the poor. According to William Barclay, there was a weekly distribution that provided seven days’ worth of food for the local poor (the *kuppah*) and a daily distribution for strangers who happened by (the *tamhui*). Collectors from the synagogue went to markets and to homes to gather such offerings. The early Christians seem to have taken up this custom.

What appeared initially to be a logistical problem raised two additional serious concerns for the apostles. The first was the increasing neglect of their priorities. “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve on tables” (v. 2). Present-day pastors can testify to how hard it is to set aside time for prayer and study when administrative tasks (preparing bulletins, setting up a classroom, corresponding, organizing agendas for meetings, and more) demand attention. A second concern was the threat to the Church’s unity that a “Hellenist versus Hebrew” quarrel posed. What was to be done?

SOLUTION? SEVEN MAGNIFICENT DEACONS

ACTS 6:3–7

The apostles took action to resolve the issue. They met with the whole body of disciples (Luke uses this word 23 times to identify the Church) and proposed a solution: “pick out from among you seven men...whom we will appoint to this

duty [food distribution]” (v. 3). After proposing the solution, the apostles turned over the actual task of choosing the seven to the Church.

The job requirements are noteworthy. The seven were to be a) men, b) having “good repute,” c) “full of the Spirit,” and d) wise (v. 3). As with similar lists of requirements for overseers (bishops) and deacons in 1 Tim. 3 and elders and overseers in Titus 1, experience on the job and special training are *not* required. Good character and spiritual maturity *are*. The body of believers make their choices and, in short order, the apostles pray and “lay hands” on them, an action that was understood not only to authorize but to empower and bless the one appointed (cf. Gen. 48:12–20, Num. 27:18–23 and Acts 8:18 and 13:3).

This story reminds us of another story of a “food problem” solved by appointing helpers. When the Israelites in the wilderness complained to Moses about the dreariness of eating manna seven days a week, Moses complained to God that the burden of leadership was “too heavy for me” (Num. 11:14). God’s solution was to have Moses appoint seventy (a multiple of seven!) elders to help and, though Pentecost was still centuries away, God “took some of the Spirit that was on [Moses] and put it on the seventy elders” (v. 25).

The seven appointed here in Acts all bear Greek names — Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, the last man further identified as a (Gentile) “proselyte of Antioch” (v. 5). Though many Jews in those days had Greek as well as Hebrew names, the fact that the Greek names are used is a strong indication that the concerns of the Hellenists had been heard and would be taken care of. Interestingly, though we identify these seven as “deacons,” they are nowhere explicitly called “deacons” in this passage. The title is apt, however, because the Greek root word

diakonia is used in v. 1 (“distribution”) and v. 4 (“ministry”), and the verb form *diakonein* appears in v. 2 (“serve”).

The appointment of the seven men at first seems a minor matter. Why does it get such major attention? Likely because it brought peace in a potentially divisive situation. Likely also because the apostles could once more attend to their priorities. In addition, the story introduces us to two men who will now play a larger role in the defense and spread of the Gospel — Stephen and Philip.

The section ends with the first of what Martin Franzmann identifies as six “summarizing statements” scattered through Acts (see also 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, and 28:31). Franzmann suggests that these statements provide Luke’s own outline of the book, marking steps in the progress of the Word of God on its way from Jerusalem to Rome (*The Word of the Lord Grows*, p. 204). In this verse we learn that “a great many of the priests” joined the church. Robert Smith estimates that there were some 8,000 priests in Palestine at that time, so this is no small addition! Since the rank-and-file priests were *not* Sadducees (from whose ranks high priests were drawn), this may partially explain the “jealousy” that moved the Sadducees to oppose the Church.

STEPHEN’S GRACE AND POWER

ACTS 6:8–15

Now begins what Richard Longenecker calls the “second panel” of Acts, focusing on three pivotal figures — Stephen (Chapters 6–7), Philip (8), and Saul (9). Stephen comes first. Stephen is Spirit-filled in a way that equips him for much more than wise food distribution! Like the apostles, he works

“great wonders and signs” (healings?) among the people (v. 8) and teaches or preaches with “wisdom and the Spirit” (v. 10). Like Peter and John had done, Stephen aroused opposition, this from one or more “synagogues” of Jews. We know little about the “synagogue of the Freedmen” (v. 9). Their name suggests that they had been captive for a time, then released by the Romans. The mention of Cyrenians and Alexandrians (from Africa) and “those from Cilicia and Asia” (from modern-day Turkey) may be identifying the places of origin of those “freedmen,” or perhaps they were separate groups, but all were united in the opposition to Stephen’s message.

The charges they brought against Stephen are summarized as “blasphemous words” (Num. 15:30 NIV applied this to anyone who spoke or sinned defiantly). More specifically, they say those words are “against Moses and God” (v. 11). This is further sharpened by “false witnesses” who accuse Stephen of speaking “against this holy place [the temple] and the law” (v. 13). They add that they have heard him “say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered” (v. 14). It’s almost an instant replay of the false witnesses in Jesus’ trial who accused Him of saying he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days (Matt. 26:61–66). It appears from the start that, as it was with Jesus’ trial, the intent of the Sanhedrin was murderous.

Luke probably got his information about Stephen’s trial, his “angelic” face, and his subsequent speech from Saul (Paul) who was there for the trial and execution of Stephen and much later had Luke as traveling companion.

Stephen's speech may sound rambling to us, but it is a pointed response to the charges made against him. As he speaks, Stephen addresses the three great pillars of Jewish piety before the destruction of Jerusalem — the land, the Law, and the temple.



ISRAEL'S HISTORY

ACTS 7:1–53

One of the “Magnificent Seven” now gives a magnificent speech. At 52 verses it is the longest in the Book of Acts. It is a “Reader’s Digest” history of the Old Testament, focusing narrowly on Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. Stephen’s speech may sound rambling to us, but it is a pointed response to the charges made against him. As he speaks, Stephen addresses the three great pillars of Jewish piety before the destruction of Jerusalem — the land, the Law, and the temple.

He begins with Abraham, where Israel’s history begins. Why retrace ancient history? The Christian faith, Stephen asserts, is not a repudiation of our ancient faith, but a continuation of what God had been doing from the start. Paul will later make crystal clear the connections between Jesus, Abraham, and Moses as Stephen begins to do here.

Jewish piety, as noted, had focused on the land, the Law, and the temple. Yet, says Stephen, some of the greatest things God said and did took place *outside* this land and *before* the building of the temple! Abraham was in Mesopotamia. What’s more, he got “no inheritance” in the Promised Land, “not even a foot’s length” (v. 5 — for dramatic effect, Stephen overlooks Gen. 23:8–17)! Joseph’s great rescue from his brothers brought him to Egypt. There God fulfilled His promise to take a scattered few and make them a “great nation.” There also Moses enacted God’s mighty deliverance in the exodus. All of this took place outside the land. It’s as if he is reminding the listeners not to limit God’s sphere of operation, as they are trying to do with the Christian movement.

A second theme that runs through Stephen’s speech is the rejection and resistance that God’s great ones encountered. Joseph, he says, encountered the “jealousy” (take note, you Sadducees!) of his brothers, “the patriarchs” (v. 9), and a clear reminder that even Israel’s founding fathers went badly wrong (as you council members are doing now!). “But God was with him and rescued him” reminds us of the apostolic proclamation that Jesus too, rejected and killed by Israel, was rescued by God (pay attention, you leaders who killed Jesus!).

Moses likewise, though “mighty in words and deeds” (v. 22) and sent by God as a “redeemer” (v. 35), was resisted by his own people (vv. 27 and 35 — “who made you a ruler and a judge?”). Have you not read, Stephen seems to say, the prophecy of Moses that “God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers” (v. 37, quoting Deut. 18:15)? Who do you suppose that redeemer, that “prophet like Moses” is? Ah, the false witnesses already mentioned His name!

Stephen was charged with speaking against the temple and its customs (worship). As his speech draws to a close, he lays the groundwork for a closer look at worship — both idolatrous and genuine. He reminds the listeners that the people of Israel (“our fathers”) had a sorry history of idolatrous worship (vv. 40–41 — “make for us gods” and “they made a calf... and offered a sacrifice to the idol” in Ex. 32:1, 23). He quotes Amos 5:25–27, which accuses Israel of worshipping Moloch, the stars, and images in the desert. Finally he quotes Is. 66:1–2, a clear word from God that no “house” made by men can contain Him. “The Most High does not dwell in houses” (v. 48).

It is a passionate oration with, admittedly, some inexactitudes (for example in v. 2 — Abraham receives the promise before moving to Haran, though Gen. 11:31–12:1 suggests otherwise) and some approximations (v. 6 — “afflict them four hundred years,” though Ex. 12:40 says it was 430, and v. 14 — there were “seventy-five persons” who moved to Egypt, though Ex. 1:5 says “seventy”). In his Spirit-guided zeal, Stephen finally delivers a direct, blistering polemic against the members of the Sanhedrin. They are “stiff-necked” (cf. Ex. 33:5) and “uncircumcised in heart and ears” (cf. Jer. 9:26), people who “always resist the Holy Spirit”

(v. 51). The accused ends by accusing them of betrayal and murder of “the Righteous One” and failure to keep the Law “delivered by angels” (as Jewish tradition said happened at Sinai). Wow!

A MAGNIFICENT MARTYR

ACTS 7:54–60

Even at this distance in time, we can feel the heat of Stephen’s speech. Imagine how the Sanhedrin’s members squirmed! Luke tells us plainly the reaction to his speech: “they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him” (v. 54). The Greek word for “witness” is *martyr*. Stephen has made his witness in words and now will do so with his blood.

It was a magnificent martyrdom because it was so very like that of Jesus Himself. The trial happened before the same group of leaders. Both men had to respond directly to the query of the high priest. Both were accused by false witnesses. Stephen says he sees “the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (v. 56, alluding to Dan. 7:13–14, as Jesus had done in Matt. 26:64), confirming Jesus’ claim as the “Son of Man” in Daniel’s vision and condemning the Sanhedrin’s unjust verdict. As he is being stoned, he prays for Jesus to “receive my spirit,” nearly the same petition Jesus had addressed to His Father (Luke 23:46), and further asks “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” as Jesus had done (Luke 23:34). The “Feast of Stephen” still recalls him as the Church’s first martyr.

We stand as witnesses to a magnificent martyrdom, the first of many to come. Even closer stood a young man upon whose memory this scene was emblazoned. That young man was Saul (v. 58). He himself would one day make the same confession of faith and join the “noble army of martyrs” with Stephen.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 8:1–40

Lord, I do not know what road I will take this week, this very day. I pray that I may stand ready, as did Philip, for whatever and whoever you put in my path. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Review

1. How many of the seven deacons can you recall? What was their job? How did Stephen go “above and beyond” that role?

2. Upon which Old Testament heroes of faith did Stephen focus and why?

3. List the similarities between the trial and death of Stephen and that of Jesus.

Acts 8:1–3

4. What signals that we are moving into a new section of the book (see 1:8)?

5. We have just read about the martyrdom of Stephen and recalled the death of Jesus. Can you think of any tragic deaths in our own time that have led to positive outcomes?

Acts 8:4–25

6. In v. 4 who is “preaching”? (Compare v. 1). Do you think we are doing this today? Why or why not?

7. How are Philip and Stephen connected? What is the significance of where Philip goes to proclaim Christ?

8. Describe Simon Magus before verse 23. What impresses him? Do you think the words of v. 24 describe a lasting change of heart?

9. If you are a long-time Christian, what evidence do you see in your life that you are still a “work in progress”?

10. This story has been called “The Samaritan Pentecost.” In what sequence are baptism and the Holy Spirit received?

11. Why do you suppose the Apostles (Peter and John) have to come on the scene? What do they add to the work of Philip?

12. Can you recall a time when you found yourself jealous of the gifts/abilities of another Christian?

Acts 8:26-40

13. How much “planning” goes into this trip? What is the real impetus for it?

14. What do you learn about the man in the chariot? Why had he been visiting Jerusalem?

15. What can we learn from Philip’s approach to evangelism? What Bible “text” becomes the focus of his witness?

16. What Old Testament Scriptures would you use in sharing Jesus with another person?

17. When it comes to your grasp of the Bible, rate yourself:

- a) I can’t remember much of anything
- b) I’m content with what I learned in Sunday School
- c) Like the Ethiopian, I study hard but need someone to help me
- d) Like Philip, I know enough to share good things from it with others

18. What’s encouraging about this story when you think of trying to share your faith with other people?

Memory Challenge

Review what you have learned thus far.

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Church Scattered, Gospel Spread!



PICKING DANDELIONS

A small boy hears his father complain about the dandelions in the yard. So the boy goes out to wage war on them. Enthusiastically he picks every head in sight. As he grabs them, the heads white with seeds scatter them around the yard. The breeze does its part. The seeds do theirs. The next year there are even more dandelions!

If dandelions are to be eradicated, they must be dug out, root and all, or sprayed with a potent herbicide. Picking them will simply spread them. The same rule has governed the history of the Church. Its opponents have played the role of that zealous, but misguided boy. They have grabbed and shaken the believers, with the result that the Gospel has been spread far and wide! Historians are fond of saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”

This lesson holds before us the story of how serious persecution of the Church began, and how at once it began to spread the Gospel of Jesus. In Acts 8 we see the ripples spread in a widening circle, the progression of the Christian message from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria...and even into Africa. We are invited into the story.

SAUL AND THE GREAT PERSECUTION

ACTS 8:1-3

Jesus had promised that what began in Jerusalem would reach out to “all Judea and Samaria” (1:8). Now His words come true. What brought about this “watershed in the life of the church,” as Robert Smith calls it, was the start of a “great persecution against the church in Jerusalem” (v.1).

Paul is the best-known missionary of the Early Church, but Philip has the distinction of taking the first “mission journey” to a new ethnic group.



The tip of the spear thrust against the Christians was Saul of Tarsus, who had been present at Stephen’s stoning (7:58). He is hardly a “youth,” as some commentators portray him. The Greek word *neanias* means rather a “young man” between the ages of 24 and 40. What is youthful about Saul is his fanaticism against the Christians. He begins “ravaging” the Church (v. 3 — NIV translates “began to destroy”). Not a building, of course, but “men and women”!

Abandoning the sage advice of Gamaliel, his old teacher, Saul attempts to terrorize the disciples into submission by violence. But the attempt to nip the movement in the bud only prunes the Church for more rapid growth. The believers are “scattered” (v. 1) like seed before a howling wind.

Some students wonder if this persecution was aimed at the Hellenists, while the Hebraists were left unbothered, but Luke himself says “they were all scattered... except the apostles” (v. 1). This may have been a temporary scattering for some while their enemies raged, since there were still “disciples” in Jerusalem only a short time later, after Saul’s conversion (9:26). What is striking about all this is the courage of the apostles, who stayed put in the face of the persecution, and the determination of the scattered believers *not* to keep their mouths shut. The seeds scattered by persecution are about to germinate!

THE SAMARITAN PENTECOST

ACTS 8:4-25

The “Acts of the Apostles” vividly depicts acts by others besides the apostles. Two of them are part of the company of those magnificent seven deacons. Stephen gave his stirring speech and became the Church’s first martyr. Now we read of the magnificent mission exploits of another deacon, Philip. He is not, we must note, the only one “preaching”! All who were scattered took part in proclaiming the message (v. 4). That ought to make us, who like to think that only pastors can “preach,” take notice.

Paul is the best-known missionary of the Early Church, but Philip has the distinction of taking the first “mission journey” to a new ethnic group. He went “down to the city of Samaria” (v. 5 — a manuscript variant reads “a city,” not “the city”). Was it Samaria, some 35 miles north of Jerusalem, re-named Sebaste by Herod years earlier? Or perhaps Gitta, a town later identified as the home of Simon Magus, whom we will shortly meet? Whatever the case may be, in this outreach the Church ceased being merely Jewish. It crossed a cultural boundary and welcomed Samaritans, a people neither Jewish nor fully “Gentile.” Jesus had done so already with the woman at the well (John 4), and her fellow townsmen had received and believed in Jesus’ message. Now Philip does the same, with rousing success.

The Samaritans owed their origin to the Assyrians, who imported foreigners after the fall of the north in 722 BC and many native Israelites were deported (2 Kings 17). Those foreigners intermarried with the remaining Jewish natives, producing a mixed race with a mix of theological beliefs. They worshipped Yahweh, but looked for someone called *Ta'eb* (the Restorer), a messianic deliverer who would be a “new Moses.” The Samaritans eschewed Mt. Zion and worshipped instead on Mt. Gerizim. There grew a centuries-long hostility between Samaritans and Jews.

All that began to change with the arrival of Philip, who “proclaimed to them the Christ” (v. 5) and performed the kind of “signs” Jesus Himself had done, “for unclean spirits...came out of many...and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed” (v. 7). Philip’s ministry went even further than healing and exorcism. “When they believed Philip... they were baptized, both men and women” (v. 12). It was a repeat of the wonder and joy of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Only one thing was yet missing. This “Samaritan Pentecost” still needed the endowment of the Holy Spirit.

“Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John” (v. 14). We must not suppose that they came because Philip’s message was somehow deficient. Nor should we say that the baptism he administered was suspect because “they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 16 — NIV reads “simply” instead of “only”). Luke is not here pitting baptism against the Holy Spirit. He is, instead, reporting that the apostles, as designated leaders of the Church, must validate this new evangelistic outreach to a new people group. Their

appearance is a sign that the Church approves this radical extension, the incorporation of Samaritans. These former enemies, Jews and Samaritans, are now to be united in Christ. That’s headline news! A new people group has been welcomed into the Church.

That helps to explain what may baffle us who, after all these centuries, try to understand the sequencing of baptism and the giving of the Spirit in this book. Here in Samaria, baptism precedes the giving of the Spirit. Later on in Caesarea, the sequence is the reverse. At the home of Cornelius (10:44–48), the Spirit will “fall” on those listening, and they will then be baptized. In both stories, though the sequence varies, the giving of the Holy Spirit comes at the hands of the apostles. The point seems to be not the sequence, but the authorizing and acceptance of a new mission by the apostles.

AN ASTONISHED ONLOOKER, SIMON THE SORCERER

While this story is unfolding, Luke zooms his camera in for a close-up of an onlooker who is astonished by what he sees. “There was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people... saying that he himself was somebody great” (v. 9). He reminds us of the host of fortune-tellers and palm readers that still flourish among us today. This writer beheld some of them operating booths in the very shadow of the St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans! Simon Magus, as we now call him, had had everyone’s ear (v. 10). People said he was “the power of God” (cf. Luke 22:69 — there a designation of God Himself!). But Simon can see that something far greater than his magic has arrived. In short order, Simon himself believed in Jesus and was baptized (v. 13).

Why has Luke included his story? Simon's story shows us that not all the newly baptized understood Christian teaching. What's more, there was still a sinful spirit at work in some of the new converts. As he followed Philip around, Simon's entrenched love affair with power moved him to ask, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit" (v. 19). He even offered to pay them for the privilege! As happened earlier in the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Chapter 5), Peter utters a sudden startling rebuke, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!" (v. 20). Unlike Ananias and Sapphira, Simon is offered a way out if he will "Repent...and pray" that he might be forgiven (v. 22). Subdued, Simon answers, "Pray for me... that nothing of what you have said may come upon me" (v. 24). Nothing more is said of him in Acts.

Was it a lasting change of heart, or did Simon's submission simply camouflage a twisted journey that led him further into error? Early Church historian Eusebius identified Simon Magus as the "father" of the Gnostic heresy that bedeviled the Church for a long time. While we do not know that for sure, we can be certain that Simon left his name to history. The later evil practice of buying and selling ecclesiastical offices is still called "simony."

For us who read Acts today, Simon's story is a cautionary tale of what danger awaits when we find ourselves jealous of the positions, spiritual gifts, or adulation other people receive.

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

ACTS 8:26-40

Philip's mission travels were only just begun. His next stop, unplanned and unexpected, would take him into the Judean desert. "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'" (v. 26). Philip had learned to listen and obey God's promptings, so "he rose and went" (v. 27).

There were actually two Gazas. The first was "old Gaza" (or "desert Gaza"), a Philistine city on the Mediterranean coast that had been destroyed in a war in 93 BC. A new city of Gaza was built a generation later. Philip, who had been north of Jerusalem for weeks, now headed southwest, not knowing whom he would meet.

Paul Maier writes, "If Simon seemed an unlikely Christian, so did the very next convert recorded in Acts... here on a moving chariot, [Philip] encountered a pilgrim returning from worship at Jerusalem, reading aloud to himself from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah" (*First Christians*, p. 36). The man is "an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship" (v. 27).

Each part of that description needs explanation. "Ethiopia" as used by Luke does not refer to the Abyssinian kingdom of our own time, but to the land just south of Egypt now known as Sudan. A eunuch was

a man who had been castrated (on purpose) for dedicated service to the royal class, something common in the Ancient Near East. His physical condition would ensure that he could serve without distraction. He had come to worship. According to Deut. 23:1, eunuchs were barred from the temple, but this man was serious enough about the faith of Israel (and wealthy enough as well!) that he had obtained a scroll of Isaiah to read. Maier surmises that he was either a proselyte to Judaism (see Acts 2:11) who had undergone a ritual washing and circumcision, or a “god-fearer” (see Acts 13:16, 26) who, though not circumcised, attended synagogue and read the Scriptures. He was certainly both literate and capable. The Candace whom he served (“Candace” was a title of all Ethiopian queens, not a personal name) had made him her “treasury secretary.”

Philip’s approach to this man is instructive. First, and most obviously, he went to meet the eunuch where he was. Instead of loitering in Jerusalem waiting for prospects, Philip headed down a desert road and approached the man’s chariot. At the Spirit’s prompting, he literally “ran” up to and alongside the chariot (v. 30). This is a good reminder to us who desire to reach people that the Great Commission says “Go ye” and not “Sit ye”! We must meet people where they are.

The second thing Philip did was listen. Philip “heard him reading Isaiah” (v. 30), which in turn cued the question he asked the man: “Do you understand what you are reading?” The listening precedes the talking, as it must

for us in our encounters with people. How patiently do we listen?

Third, “beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus” (v. 35). The Bible text that served as the launching pad for Philip’s witness was Is. 53:7–8, a portion of the prophecy of the Suffering Servant who bore the sins of all like a lamb led to slaughter. What a wide open door for speaking the Good News of Jesus! Speak he did, and the Spirit-led encounter brought faith and a baptism. Speak we also must, not merely of a program or a congregation, but particularly of Scripture and the Good News of Jesus, still the best news after all these years. How willing are we? How eager to speak of “the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15)? How prepared to employ the Word of God as Philip was?

Though it was not the “3,000 souls” of Pentecost Day, it was no less a marvel that this one man from Africa was joined to the joyful company of disciples. In God’s economy, one is a very important number! Tradition suggests that this man of Ethiopia who went joyfully on his way home did something about it there, and the result was the beginning of the Coptic Church in Africa. Another boundary, the “color barrier,” had been crossed. Philip too must have rejoiced as the Spirit “carried” him away, traveling north, preaching all the way. So the seed was scattered and God’s Church grew. It is a joy still to be experienced, a joy prepared for people also today, even you and me.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 9:1-42

Lord God, who made the human heart and can turn our hearts with Your grace, speak to my heart in this time of study. Encourage me by the story of Saul's turning. Graciously turn me to Your purpose. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Review

1. What is the cautionary lesson we learn from Simon Magus?

2. What are the instructive and encouraging lessons we learn from Philip in his meeting with the eunuch?

Acts 9:1-19

3. Can you think of another event in the history of the Church more important than Saul's conversion, narrated *three times* in Acts (22:3-16 and 26:9-18)?

4. Write down whatever you can learn about Damascus from footnotes, Bible dictionaries, Wikipedia, etc. How far was it from Jerusalem? How large? Do you have any idea why Saul wants to go *there*?

5. Who is the **subject** (the change-agent) in this story?

6. How might the medical profession describe what happened to Saul?

a) He was struck by lightning

b) He had a nervous breakdown

c) He suffered a stroke, hallucinated, and was temporarily blinded

d) He had a psychological trauma due to religious fanaticism

e) He suffered from repressed guilt for his role in persecutions

7. Why do you think Saul was blinded?

8. What role will Saul be given (see v. 15)? What makes Saul an ODD choice for this role? A GOOD choice?

9. Why do you think Saul "must" suffer (v. 16)?

10. How does Saul (Paul) reflect on this experience in 1 Cor. 9:1 and 15:8?

11. When have you, like Ananias, obeyed the Lord even when you had doubts? What happened?

12. Do you think some people are “out of reach”? If so, how does this story challenge that assumption?

13. How would you finish this sentence: “I believe that God has chosen *me* to ...”?

Acts 9:20–31

14. Saul begins to preach “immediately” (v. 20) in the synagogues. Where do you think he has acquired the necessary knowledge to do this?

15. Compare vv. 20–29 with Gal. 1:15–21. What more do you learn about these earliest years of Saul’s Christian walk?

16. How is Saul rescued from a plot against his life (v. 25)? Can you think of an Old Testament story of a great leader rescued in a similar conveyance?

17. What special role does Barnabas play here? Whom have you (or could you) serve as a “Barnabas”?

Acts 9:32–42

18. Which of Jesus’ miracles come to mind as you read this section? Compare the raising of Tabitha with Matt. 9:25, Luke 17:11–17, and John 11:1–44.

19. Tabitha was raised, but Stephen was not. How would you explain God’s mysterious ways to Stephen’s widow or mother?

Memory Challenge

ACTS 9:15 NIV “*But the Lord said to Ananias, ‘Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.’*”



ACTS

ACTS 9:1–42

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A Conversion that Changed the World

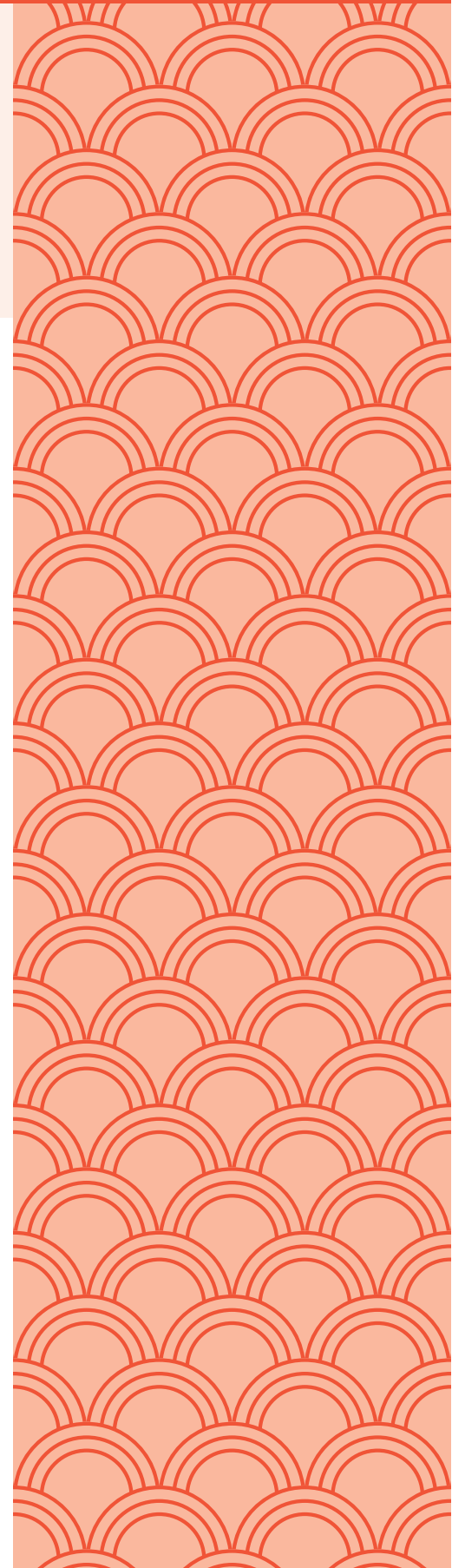


HISTORY-CHANGING MOMENTS

It sounds like a page out of a fantasy story. A man travels down a road. He sees a flash of light in the heavens, and his life takes a dramatic turn. He goes on to change world history! Actually, that very thing happened more than once in recorded history. In the year AD 312, Roman Emperor Constantine saw a heavenly light in the shape of a cross above the sun, along with the words “In this sign you will conquer.” The next night he dreamed of Christ explaining that he was to use that sign against his enemies. His subsequent victory at the Milvian Bridge helped prompt Constantine’s conversion, which changed the status of Christianity from persecuted religion to the state religion of Rome.

In the summer of 1505, a law student named Martin Luther was journeying near Stotternheim, Germany, when he was caught in a violent thunderstorm. Amid flashes of lightning, he cried out in fear, “Help, St. Anne, I will become a monk!” He escaped injury and kept his vow, entering an Augustinian monastery. It was the first step to a dramatically changed life. He would play the key role in the Reformation that altered the course of western society and world history.

But greater than either of those was something that happened at noon one day centuries earlier. Sometime between the years AD 33–36 a fanatical enemy of the Christian faith named Saul of Tarsus was traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. There flashed a heavenly light. Saul fell to the ground, heard a voice, and found his life changed. He



became Paul, a man with a new name and a new vocation as missionary for the religion he once tried to destroy. Can you think of another event in the history of the Church more important than that? The story is told not once but three times in Acts. Read and ponder it well. We must not miss the importance of a conversion that changed the world!

ENCOUNTER ON THE DAMASCUS ROAD

ACTS 9:1–9

Damascus in Paul's day was already one of the world's most continuously-inhabited ancient cities. It had a large Arab population, and it was ruled by a governor answerable to Nabatean Arab King Aretas (see 2 Cor. 11:32). The city also had a sizable Jewish community with many synagogues. Damascus was about 150 miles from Jerusalem, a week's journey on foot.

Saul went to Damascus with the full authority of the Jewish Sanhedrin seeking the extradition of any Jewish Christians who had fled there in previous months. Luke identifies them here as those "belonging to the Way" (v. 2). This name Jesus had initially given Himself (John 14:6) was now applied to His followers (see 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). It is an intriguing name, suggesting that being a follower of Jesus was a "way" of life, not merely the acceptance of a set of truths.

As Saul approached the city, the drama suddenly unfolded. A few miles south of Damascus on the Jerusalem road even today is a village with the Arabic name *Deraya* (which means "the Vision"). In these verses we witness the vision! We see the "light from heaven" that flashed, we hear the Voice that addressed him by name ("Saul, Saul..."), identified itself ("I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting"), and gave him explicit directions ("rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do"). In Luke's telling, Saul's traveling companions stand speechless, "hearing the voice but seeing no one" (v. 7). Saul, temporarily blinded, is led into the city and undergoes a three-day fast (v. 9).

ONE STORY, THREE TELLINGS

Paul himself will later retell this story twice, first to the mob at the temple in Jerusalem where he had been arrested (22:6–11), and then in his defense before King Agrippa (26:12–18). These three tellings agree in the main, but differ in some details. In all three, there comes a "light from heaven," a falling down, the voice of Jesus with His question for Saul, Saul's awed and humble response, and the Lord's revelation of Himself, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." The second account calls the light a "great" light, and the third adds that it was "brighter than the sun." In the third account alone, the light shines around Saul's companions and causes them, too, to fall down. It also adds Jesus' words, "it is hard for you to kick against the goads," along with a lengthy explanation about the purpose of His appearance to Saul, details that King Agrippa needed to hear. One other noteworthy difference is that in Luke's telling, the companions are "hearing the voice, but seeing no one" (9:7), while in the second account Paul says those with him "saw the light but did not understand the voice" (22:9). In any case, the point of the narratives is simply that Jesus Himself is the Change Agent who took Saul by the scruff of his proud neck, humbled him, turned him in a new direction, and outfitted him for his new life work, as He will soon make clear to Ananias.

What happened to Saul that day? Some commentators suggest that he was struck by lightning. Others believe his was a psychological trauma brought on by his over-zealousness or as a result of repressed guilt, especially in the death of Stephen. Doctors might try to explain it as a "nervous breakdown," a *grand mal* seizure or perhaps a stroke. Paul Maier examines these explanations and finds them all insufficient to explain the deep and permanent change in his beliefs. "He appeared...to me" was an experience Paul staked his ministry upon (1 Cor. 15:8), and was finally willing to die for. It became, for him, the validation of his ministry (1 Cor. 9:1).

In the meantime, Saul was blinded. The story of this Pharisee who finally “saw the light” recalls the encounter Jesus once had with the Pharisees after the healing of the man born blind in John 9. “For judgment I came into this world,” Jesus told them, “that those...who see may become blind” (John 9:39). Saul, the Pharisee who once thought he could see plainly, was now blind. For three long days he reviewed what he had been and done until then. He pondered the momentous encounter on the road and realized that he had come face to face with a man he thought dead, the man who was his and all Israel’s Messiah!

This story speaks powerfully to us about people we think are “out of reach.” If Saul, an articulate, well-educated opponent of Jesus could become His foremost missionary, is anyone too hard for God to change?

ANANIAS BAPTIZES SAUL

ACTS 9:10-19

While He was touching Saul with a blindness that would bring his old life to an end, Jesus was speaking in a vision to another man in the city of Damascus who would end that blindness and usher Saul into his new, divinely-appointed role. Ananias (not the one we met in Chapter 5) is instructed to proceed to “the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul” (v. 11 NIV). Such a vision was necessary, for Ananias knew all too well why Saul had come to town. We can identify with the reasonable fears he voices. Both men must undergo change!

What Ananias heard in answer to his fears surely came as a stunning surprise. “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel” (v. 15 NIV)! With Ananias, we might think Saul an odd choice at best for this mission

to Gentiles, for he is a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; Phil. 3:5), the strictest of Jews, besides being a sworn enemy of “the Way.”

In God’s wise design, however, Saul was a brilliant choice for this role. His dual destiny as missionary to Gentiles and Jews mirrors the duality of his own life. He was a Jew, to be sure, but he was also, we learn later, a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37; 22:25), that most “Gentile” of privileges. The reason for that citizenship lay in his being a “man from Tarsus.” Paul Maier explains that Jews were promised citizenship if they emigrated from Judea to Tarsus, an offer made by the Romans in 171 BC to stimulate business growth. Saul’s residence in Tarsus also sheds light on the fact that he was a tent-maker (Acts 18:3), for Tarsus and its province Cilicia were famous for *cilicium*, a cloth woven from goat hair that is still used by Bedouins for their tents. So Saul, a man from two worlds, was chosen by God to speak the Gospel to both of them.

In this role it was predictable that Saul would suffer opposition (Acts 20:23; 21:11), especially from the Jews who would now regard him as a traitor to their cause. It was just one of a long list of things he would endure (2 Cor. 6:4-10). In fact, God tells Ananias, Saul “*must* suffer for my name” (v. 16 NIV), if for no other reason than that a man so naturally proud would need a strong dose of humbling (2 Cor. 12:7-9)! On the positive side, such a shared suffering with Christ would join this man and his Savior in a way nothing else could (Gal. 6:17).

In short order, at the hand of Ananias, Saul receives his sight (“something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes”) and is baptized (v. 18 NIV). He eats, regains his strength, and begins “immediately” (v. 20) to do what Jesus has commissioned him to do.

*The enemy is now an ally. The persecutor
of Christ has become His spokesman,
proclaiming Jesus as “the Son of God.”*



AN ENEMY TURNED ALLY

ACTS 9:20-31

The enemy is now an ally. The persecutor of Christ has become His spokesman, proclaiming Jesus as “the Son of God” (v. 20) and proving that He “was the Christ” (v. 22). This miraculous turn is not lost on his hearers, who ask, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem?” (v. 21). Luke says Saul preaches “at once” (v. 20) in the synagogues. One might naturally ask where Saul acquired the necessary knowledge to do this. But he had been to “seminary” after a fashion. Saul was already well-versed in the Old Testament under Gamaliel. He knew all about the promises of the Messiah. He had listened, along with the Sanhedrin, to Stephen’s impassioned defense of Jesus as the Righteous One foretold by the prophets (7:52), the one who came as the prophet like Moses (7:37). The only difference between Saul and Stephen was that Saul rejected what Stephen proclaimed: that the Messiah was Jesus of Nazareth. Rejected it until now!

What follows is a veritable whirl of events that include preaching, plots to kill the new missionary, escapes, a necessary but unforeseen benefactor, and travels hither and yon. Luke telescopes the events that took at least three years into a single phrase: “after many days” (v. 23 NIV). We have the benefit of reading Saul’s (Paul’s) own account of things in his letters, and from this point on we must make some attempt to synchronize Acts with Paul’s epistles. Paul narrates the events of these days with additional detail in Galatians 1:11–24, where Paul’s intent is to make clear that his message was not given him by “any man,” even an apostle (Gal. 1:12)! What we read in Galatians explains his delay, for a time, in making an appearance in Jerusalem.

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Saul’s time line we re-construct as follows:

- Conversion on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1–19a)
- Preaching in Damascus (Acts 9:19b–22)
- Residency for a time in Arabia, then return to Damascus (Gal. 1:17)
- “After many days” a death plot by Jews and his escape (Acts 9:23–25 NIV)
- Journey to Jerusalem, sees Cephas and James (Acts 9:26–29, Gal. 1:18–20)
- Another plot against his life by “Hellenists” (Acts 9:29)
- Travel to Caesarea, then to Syria and Cilicia (Acts 9:29, Gal. 1:21).

The plot against Saul in Damascus (the first of several such) is averted by an ingenious rescue. “His disciples” lower him in a basket “through an opening in the wall,” likely the window of a home built into the city’s wall. This was necessary because the city gates were being closely watched. The escape in a basket reminds us of the deliverance of the infant Moses in a similar conveyance (Ex. 2:3). So delivered, Saul makes his way to Jerusalem, fully three years after his conversion.

A few verses later, Barnabas re-emerges to play the role his name (“son of encouragement”) suggests. Saul is greeted by suspicion in Jerusalem by disciples who doubtless had painful memories of the earlier “great persecution” (8:1) and Saul’s role in it. “But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles” and told Saul’s amazing story (v. 27). The “apostles” mentioned here, we gather, may only have been Peter and James, the Lord’s brother (Gal. 1:18–19). After a brief time of “preaching boldly” there, another plot necessitates his journey north to Caesarea and home to Tarsus (v. 30). After another summary statement in v. 31 (“the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and...multiplied”), the spotlight turns once more to the ministry of Peter.

PETER ENCOUNTERS AENEAS AND DORCAS

ACTS 9:32–42

Luke here gives an account of the Gospel's widening growth in Palestine's maritime plain and Syria. Earlier planting of the Gospel's seed was made by Peter and John in Samaria (8:25) and by Philip along the coast (8:40). As Philip undertook a "mission journey" at the end of Chapter 8, now Peter also makes his own small journey, one in which he works alone, no longer partnered with John or the others. Luke describes three significant stops.

The first is in Lydda, 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Lydda would later gain fame as the locale of St. George and the dragon (AD 300) and still later the trial of Pelagius for heresy (AD 415). But for now the man in focus is Aeneas, a paralytic "bedridden for eight years" (v. 33). The encounter brings to mind the invalid at Bethesda bedridden for 38 years (John 5:1–15) and the paralytic on his bed lowered to Jesus through the roof (Luke 5:17–26). While the healings are similar, the words of Peter make clear that it was not Peter who healed. "Jesus Christ heals you!" (v. 34), he said, a vivid reminder that in Acts, Jesus Himself continues the ministry He "began to do" in Luke's Gospel (Acts 1:1). The response is electric: "all the residents of Lydda and Sharon...turned to the Lord" (v. 35).

The second stop is in Joppa (modern Jaffa), a seaport 35 miles from Jerusalem, 10 miles north of Lydda. Through this great seaport town Solomon brought cedars from Lebanon for the temple (2 Chron. 2:16), and from it Jonah sailed for Tarshish (Jonah 1:3). Its only

rival in New Testament times was Caesarea, which Herod the Great built into a magnificent new port city because the residents of Joppa hated him (so writes Longenecker).

As Jesus was once summoned by Jairus to help his dying daughter, so now Peter is urgently summoned to Joppa by disciples after the death of a woman named Tabitha (or "Dorcas" — both names mean "gazelle"). Interestingly, when she is called a "disciple," it is the only instance of the feminine noun *matheetria* in the New Testament! The good deeds of this charitable woman, which still inspire many a "Dorcas Guild" in our day, provoked heartfelt lamentation from the widows she had helped. The memory of Jesus' miraculous raising of the ruler's daughter (Luke 8:41–56) must have been in Peter's mind as he spoke to the dead woman: "Tabitha, arise" (Aramaic *tabitha kumi*), nearly the same words Jesus spoke: "Child, arise" (Aramaic *talitha kumi*). Once again, as in Lydda, the impact is noteworthy: "many believed in the Lord" (v. 42).

He remained there in Joppa "for many days" (v. 43) doing his Gospel work while residing with one Simon a tanner. That fact is significant, for Jews regarded tanners (who worked with dead animals) as ritually unclean. It is a hint, perhaps, of a growing willingness in Peter to disregard ceremonial tradition. If so, it is also an interesting preface to the next stop further north in Caesarea. That one will prove to be the greatest, for it will open the door for the mission to the Gentiles.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 10:1–11:18

Lord Jesus, as You opened Peter's eyes to the Gentiles, so open my eyes to people unlike me. Through this study, widen my vision and my heart for the lost. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Review

1. Where in Acts are the three accounts of the conversion of Saul? How are they alike? How different?

2. How do we see Peter replicating the ministry of Jesus? In what way does Peter make clear that Jesus is *still* the one doing that ministry?

Acts 10:1–8

3. What do you learn about centurions from Bible dictionaries, concordances, footnotes, or the internet? Check out Matt. 8:5; Luke 7:3 and 23:47; Acts 27:1.

4. Cornelius was a soldier in an occupation army. What is highly unusual about him?

5. What role does the angel play in this human drama? (cf. 8:26). How does the role of angels in these stories differ from the role of people?

6. How far is Joppa from Caesarea? (Bible map or internet search)

Acts 10:9–23a

7. Have you ever had a dream that stayed with you and caused you to reflect on its meaning?

8. Before thinking further about this section, read Leviticus 11:4–7, 13–19, 29–30. With these restrictions, how do you think Peter felt when commanded to “kill and eat”? Why do you suppose the vision is repeated three times?

9. Peter takes a “first step” into a new world in verse 23. How? Can you think of similar steps Jesus took?

10. How much contact do you have just now with people of other ethnic groups? What feelings or beliefs do you hold that might inhibit you from making a witness to them?

Acts 10:23b–43

11. How did Cornelius greet Peter (astonishing from a Roman officer!)? Why did Peter react as he did?

12. What's Peter application of the vision on the rooftop? How does this fit the developing drama in Acts, outlined in 1:8?

13. Cornelius gathered his “relatives and close friends.” If you were to have such a spiritual gathering in your home, whom would you invite?

14. Summarize Peter's message about Jesus here. Where did it begin? What are the “highlights” Peter mentions? Any significant differences from his sermon in Acts 2? What is the offer he makes the hearers?

Acts 10:44–48

15. Here is a “third Pentecost”! Compare the details with what transpires in Chapter 2 and Chapter 8.

16. Which comes first here — baptism or the giving of the Holy Spirit? What's the sequence in 8:12–17?

17. Are there any groups of people who would assume that your church “is not for us”? If so, why?

Acts 11:1–18

18. The “Gentile Pentecost” reverberated through the Jewish Christian community. What in particular riled them about Peter's actions? (This is not the last time Peter was in “hot water” over the Gentile question! See Galatians 2:11ff.)

19. How does Peter defend his actions to the Jerusalem leaders? What is his strongest argument?

20. The Jerusalem leaders conclude that God has been at work. Can you think of any event/ movement in the church during your lifetime that bears the mark of “God at work”?

Memory Challenge

Choose one

ACTS 10:28B *“God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.”*

ACTS 11:17 *“If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?”*



ACTS

ACTS 10:1–11:18

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A Boundary Crossed

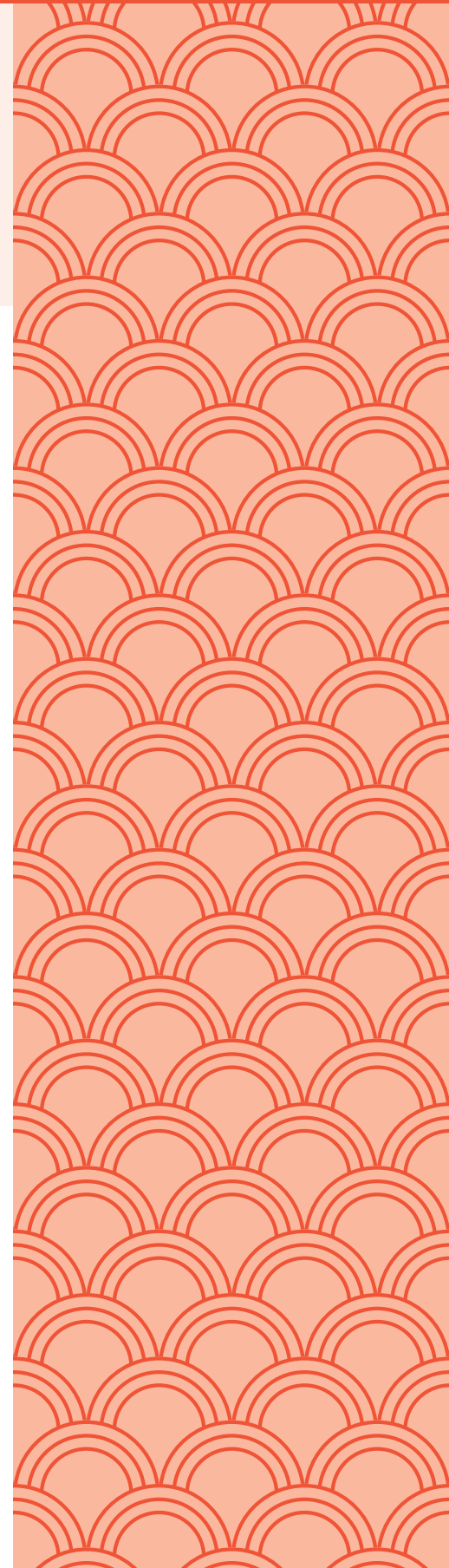


BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES

The world is full of borders and boundaries, along with notices that alert travelers of their approach. City limits. State lines. Fences with signs that say “No Trespassing!” Ports of entry. Customs booths. Even fruit inspection stations. Anyone who has traveled between nations has stories to tell about border crossings. This author remembers crossing the famed Allenby Bridge over the Jordan River that separates Israel and Jordan. Uniformed guards with guns sat facing each other in sandbagged positions. Now that’s a border taken seriously!

There are other kinds of boundaries besides the ones that separate nations or states. Invisible social boundaries signal neighborhoods off limits for certain classes or ethnic groups. Ghettoes are alive and well. “Mixed marriages” were a bigger item a generation ago, but people are still aware of the challenge they pose. Romeo and Juliet discovered how serious are the taboos that divide families and forbid marrying across such a boundary.

The story of the Christian church in Acts is the story of boundaries faced and crossed, and the repercussions of those crossings. It wasn’t just geography in play as the early believers made their witness “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Ancient animosities had to be faced. Racial and religious barriers had to be penetrated. The Gospel of Jesus demanded it. The tenth chapter of Acts tells the story of a boundary crossed, what William Barclay calls “one of the great turning points in the history of the Church.”



A CENTURION IN CAESAREA

ACTS 10:1–8

It happened in Caesarea, a coastal town on the Mediterranean about 70 miles northwest of Jerusalem and 30 miles north of Joppa. The town formerly known as Strato's Tower had been re-named in honor of Caesar Augustus by Herod the Great, who made what had been a second-class harbor into a magnificent seaport. He deepened the harbor, built a strong breakwall, constructed an imposing city with an amphitheater, and brought in fresh water through an elaborate aqueduct. Caesarea in New Testament times was the capital of the Roman province of Judea, and Roman soldiers were garrisoned there to protect the city and its water supply.

“At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius” (v. 1). The name Cornelius was a common name in Rome ever since one Cornelius Sulla had liberated 10,000 slaves in 82 BC, *all* of whom took their patron's name as they established themselves in Roman society! This Cornelius was on the “other side” of two boundaries. He was a Gentile, but not just any Gentile. He was also a Roman soldier, “a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort.” The Roman army was organized into legions of 6,000 men. Each legion had ten “cohorts” of 600 men, and each cohort had 6 “centuries” of 100 men. The centuries were led by “centurions,” officers who had worked their way through the ranks, roughly the equivalent of a captain today. An archeological inscription verifies that there was a “Second Italian Cohort of Roman Citizen Volunteers” (Maier). These Italians were probably requested by Pontius Pilate for security purposes since most of the other “Roman” soldiers stationed in Judea were Samaritan and Syrian mercenaries who nourished a cordial hatred for the Jews they were supposed to police!

As a Gentile himself, Luke pays special attention to Roman centurions (see Luke 7:1–10; 23:47; Acts 21:31–40; 22:24–30; 23:16–35; 27:1–3), and they never appear in an unfavorable light. Cornelius, likewise, earns high praise from Luke. He was “a devout man, who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously... and prayed continually...” (v. 2). “Feared God” is probably the technical term that applied to Gentiles who had attached themselves to the Jewish faith, though without being circumcised (see 13:16, 26). Two of the pillars of Jewish piety, prayer and almsgiving, were part of his regular routine.

The first act in this drama was a vision granted to Cornelius one afternoon. “The ninth hour” (v. 3) is 3 p.m., one of three hours of daily prayer for the Jews. In that vision an “angel of God” (cf. Luke 1:8, 26; Acts 8:26) appeared to Cornelius, called him by name, acknowledged his piety, and directed Cornelius to send men to Joppa to fetch “Simon who is called Peter” (v. 5 — the only time in Acts he is so identified). Cornelius obeyed at once, sending “two of his servants and a devout soldier” (v. 7). It was Peter the apostle, not Philip the deacon, who was to be summoned, even though Philip lived there in Caesarea (see 8:40 and 21:8–9); for it was at the hands of the apostles that boundary crossings were to be validated (as we saw in 8:14).

THE VISION OF ANIMALS IN A SHEET

ACTS 10:9–23A

Luke leaves no doubt that this chain of events is orchestrated by God, for the second scene unfolds “the next day... as [the messengers from Cornelius] were... approaching the city” (v. 9). Peter, unaware of the messengers' approach, goes to the rooftop (for solitude?) to pray. It is noon, and Peter grows hungry. The Greek word means “very hungry” and occurs only here in the New Testament. While

he awaits his meal, he falls into a trance (*ekstasis*) and, as did Cornelius the previous day, has a vision. The vision is repeated three times (v. 16), another signal that it is from God since three is often a “God number” for Jews (e.g. the trios in Is. 6:1–3).

Before examining the vision, we recall the elaborate Old Testament directives to the Jews to observe “clean and unclean” in the food they were to eat. Leviticus 11:3 made plain which land animals were “clean” (those that part the hoof and chew the cud). Clean aquatic animals included only those with “fins and scales” (11:9). Many birds, especially predators, were off limits. So were most reptiles. The clean and unclean food distinction was only one part of a system that drew boundaries around the Jews as God’s holy people, reminding them that they were specially set apart for their assigned role of bringing blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:3). Now the time had come for that once-useful boundary to come down so that the promised blessing might be imparted.

The vision itself was of a “great sheet” (the same Greek word can mean “sail”). Inside were all kinds (clean and unclean) of “animals and reptiles and birds of the air” (v. 12). Peter was stunned by the accompanying command he heard: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat” (v. 13). His response, “By no means, Lord!” (v. 14), echoes what the prophet Ezekiel had said long ago when God commanded him to eat his food in “unclean” fashion, baked on human dung (Ezek. 4:14). The Voice explained things to Peter in a way

that would, just moments later, become abundantly clear: “What God has made clean, do not call common” (v. 15).

As Peter is still reeling from the vision and trying to make sense of it, the three men from Cornelius are standing at the gate, asking for him. As He had done with Philip in the desert, the Holy Spirit now directs Peter in explicit fashion, with practically step-by-step instructions: “Three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them” (vv. 19–20). There are to be no missteps at this important boundary crossing!

“So he invited them in to be his guests” (v. 23). It seems a small thing to do, but in this moment Peter takes a “first step” across the dividing line into a new world. A few days hence he would explain to a roomful of Gentiles that it was “unlawful” for a Jew to “associate with or to visit anyone of another nation” (v. 28), but here he begins to do that very thing. His invitation would mean sleeping under the same roof and eating at the same table. Jesus himself had already taken such bold steps. He set out to visit a centurion’s home, a visit made unnecessary by that man’s protest, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof” and request that He simply speak the word of healing (Matt. 8:7–8). He “did not want anyone to know” he had visited a home in the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. There He granted the petition of a woman to cast a demon from her daughter (Mark 7:24–30). Now Peter follows his master’s steps.

For the first time in Acts, a Gentile audience hears the Good News of Jesus. The sermon Peter preaches this day has similarities to his Pentecost sermon. In both, Jesus' death and resurrection is at the center of things, and "we are witnesses."



PETER'S SERMON IN CORNELIUS' HOUSE

ACTS 10:23B–43

When Peter and six of the "brothers" (cf. 11:12) arrive in Caesarea, Cornelius "fell down at his feet and worshipped him" (v. 25), an astonishing act by a Roman officer toward a Jew. But Peter, unaccustomed to such honors and brought up to consider them blasphemous (Longenecker), orders Cornelius to "Stand up; I too am a man" (v. 26).

Ushered in to meet the relatives and friends Cornelius has assembled to hear him, Peter explains to them his willingness to do the "unlawful" and cross the divide by citing his vision: "God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean" (v. 28). But he is still mystified about why the invitation was issued in the first place. Cornelius now reveals his own vision four days previous. The working of God becomes evident. "Now... we are all here... to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord" (v. 33).

For the first time in Acts, a Gentile audience hears the Good News of Jesus. The sermon Peter preaches this day has similarities to his Pentecost sermon. In both, Jesus' death and resurrection is at the center of things, and "we are witnesses." Both sermons hold out God's offer of forgiveness, as Jesus had instructed the apostles in Luke 24:47. But the differences between the sermons are noteworthy. On Pentecost Day, his Jewish audience heard a sermon punctuated with Old Testament quotations. Here there are no quotes for his Gentile listeners, but only the assertion that "all the prophets bear witness" to that gift of forgiveness. There is more detail "beginning from Galilee" about the earthly ministry of Jesus. On Pentecost he boldly told the Jewish listeners "*you* crucified and killed" Jesus. Here he tells the Gentiles that "*they* put him to death" (v. 39). Most striking is the absence of a command to be baptized or any promise of the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost he commanded, "repent and be baptized, every one of you!" (2:38). Here he simply announces that "everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (v. 43). It seems clear that Peter had not intended to baptize anyone that day. God Himself will orchestrate that final step.

THE GENTILE PENTECOST

ACTS 10:44–48

Suddenly “while Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word” (v. 44). There was no doubt of it, for the distinctive phenomenon of Pentecost — “they were hearing them speaking in tongues” — was now repeated (v. 46). Here to witness the outpouring were the six “believers from among the circumcised” (v. 45) who had accompanied Peter. This was a “third Pentecost,” God’s gift to the Gentiles, as that in Chapter 2 had been for the Jews and in Chapter 8 for the Samaritans. The word of Jesus about the Gospel’s spread to “Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (1:8) was coming true before their eyes!

Peter was convinced. “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (v. 48). The baptisms follow at once. The sequence here (Spirit, then baptism) is the reverse of that in Samaria (see 8:12–17) since an apostle, Peter himself, is present to validate the crossing of this final boundary into new territory.

PETER FACES HIS CRITICS

ACTS 11:1–18

The “Gentile Pentecost” reverberated through the Jewish Christian community. Even while Peter remained in Caesarea giving additional instruction to the new believers (10:48), the apostles and the church back home heard the news of this seismic shift. Those of the “circumcision party” (see, for example, Gal. 2:12) who believed that Jewish tradition must, at all costs, be maintained, were distressed that Peter (their leader, of all people!) had

crossed a line and had table fellowship with Gentiles. How would their Jewish neighbors in Jerusalem look upon this latest break from the old ways? They likely feared it would bring more persecution for the infant church. Upon Peter’s return to Jerusalem, there was an immediate confrontation.

The only clear line of defense for his bold action was to tell the story once more. Luke faithfully records Peter’s “instant replay” of the events at Joppa and Caesarea, adding the detail that six brothers accompanied him. It hadn’t been Peter’s idea to do any of this! All of it was from God. “I saw a vision...from heaven” (v. 5). “The Spirit told me to go with them” (v. 12). “[Cornelius] told us how he had seen the angel” (v. 13). “The Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning” (v. 15). This last was the strongest argument, for it was entirely beyond Peter’s control and had been witnessed by seven of their number. His conclusion was indisputable: “If... God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us...who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” (v. 17).

The response of the church was a pensive silence to absorb this news, followed by a whole-hearted endorsement: “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life” (v. 18). This unified and joyful response, just as surely as the event at Cornelius’s house, validated this momentous crossing of an age-old boundary. Many practical questions were still to be settled, and Peter himself would later flinch in the face of the circumcision party in Antioch (see Gal. 2:11–14). Nevertheless, the church had ceased being merely a Jewish sect and had truly become a “world religion.”

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 11:19–12:25

Lord Jesus, as a Christian I wear Your name. Live in me and work through me to do Your will. Open my mind now as I study Your Word. I ask it for Your name's sake. Amen.

Review

1. If you had been one of Peter's companions, what evidence would convince you that this outreach to the Gentiles was truly God's doing?

2. How does Peter fashion his sermon to the particular audience he meets at the home of Cornelius? Give at least three examples.

Acts 11:19–30

3. Locate Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch on a map. Calculate the distance between these places and Jerusalem to gauge the spread of the Gospel.

4. Antioch was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire. What might the apostles feel as they hear "the Gospel is taking root there"? What special distinction marks this city (v. 26)?

5. How does Barnabas live up to his name ("The Encourager") in this section?

6. Who has been your Barnabas?

7. Why is the prophecy of Agabus important for the disciples? How does God use this prophesied "natural disaster" for good?

Acts 12:1–5

8. There are several "Herods" mentioned in the New Testament. Which one is this? Which ones do we read about in Matt. 2:1–19 and 14:1–12? How are they related? What traits do they have in common?

9. James is first of the original 12 to be martyred. Imagine you are speaking with the mother of James afterward. How would you attempt to explain to her why there was no angelic rescue for James (as later with Peter)?

10. During what season does the subsequent arrest of Peter take place? During what season was Jesus crucified?

11. What do you think this execution and imprisonment would do to our congregation today?

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| _____ Bring us closer together | _____ Move us to pray hard |
| _____ Make us take a public stand | _____ Drive us into hiding |
| _____ End our gatherings | _____ I have no idea... |

Acts 12:6–17

12. Have you or a family member ever had an experience with what you thought was an angel?

13. Why might Peter have originally thought this was a “vision” (recall what just happened in Joppa)? What finally convinced him it wasn’t?

14. Why, if they had been praying, do you think the disciples had such a hard time believing Rhoda’s story?

- a) No angel had rescued James, after all
- b) Rhoda was “out of her mind”
- c) Peter’s escaping that very night wasn’t the answer they expected
- d) Prayers don’t get answered this fast!

15. Is there anything you’re currently praying about that you don’t expect will be granted by God? If so, why not?

16. Verse 17 mentions “James.” But isn’t he dead? What other men named James might be the one named here? Check footnotes, Bible dictionary, or Wikipedia.

Acts 12:18–25

17. Can you think of other biblical stories in which someone was “struck down” directly by God as punishment? (Hint: we have already covered one previously in Acts.)

18. What does this story have to teach us about the way we deal with persecution/opposition? Where do you see such persecution today and how do you see the church responding?

Memory Challenge

Review what you have learned thus far.

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God’s Hand Strengthens and Saves



IN WHOSE HANDS?

One way to get to know people is to watch their hands at work. Idle hands, we say, are “the devil’s workshop,” a sign of laziness, or at least a lack of imagination! Busy hands indicate interest and effort. Hands can be articulate — some of us simply can’t talk without using our hands! There’s a special fascination in watching someone use sign language.

Jesus’ earthly ministry was the “sign language of God.” His hands were always in meaningful motion — praying, healing, breaking bread, blessing children — signaling the gracious care of God. His nail-pierced hands were instruments of our salvation. A week after His resurrection came the words, “Put your finger here.... see my hands!” (John 20:27). It was His invitation to Thomas to come out of his doubt and into faith. We consider His hands and seek to let them move our own.

The Book of Acts is the story of “hands-on” ministry by the disciples of Jesus as their ministry replicated His touching, healing, breaking bread, and blessing. We see hands at work baptizing thousands. We see the blessing through hands laid on the seven new deacons (6:6), the new Samaritan believers (8:17), missionaries Saul and Barnabas (13:3), and the disciples of John in Ephesus (19:6).

In this lesson, we watch two contrasting sets of hands. In Acts 11:21 we read that the mission of the church prospered because “the hand of the Lord was with them.” The risen Lord, Jesus Christ, was continuing His ministry — His hands working through theirs! But in Acts 12:1 we see another set of hands at work: “Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.” The hands of Herod and the hand of the risen Lord — two drastically different sets of hands! The challenge for those disciples and for us now is to trust that whatever human hands may do to us, we are, finally, in the Lord’s hands.

THE LORD’S HAND: THE PLANTING OF THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH

ACTS 11:19–26

The narrative of the disciples scattered by persecution and preaching the Word begun three chapters earlier (8:4) here resumes with the very same words: “Now those who were scattered...” (11:19). Luke describes the believers making another leap forward, this time to “Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.” Phoenicia is nearly 200 miles north, the island of Cyprus a bit farther, and Antioch fully 300 miles from Jerusalem.

With a population of more than 500,000, Antioch was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. One of 16 cities that bore this name in honor of the Seleucid King Antiochus Epiphanes, it was called “Antioch on the Orontes (River)” to distinguish it from the others. This lovely city, the “Queen of the East,” was dedicated to the pursuit of many pleasures, including chariot racing! The temple of Daphne (in mythology, a maiden with whom Apollo fell in love) stood near the town in a laurel grove, serviced by priestesses who were prostitutes. The worship there made Antioch a byword for luxurious immorality. People said Antioch had “the morals of Daphne.”

For Luke the really noteworthy item about Antioch was that “men of Cyprus and Cyrene... spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus” (v. 20). Here, very clearly, the Gospel was growing beyond its Jewish roots. That Jesus is proclaimed as “Lord” and not “Christ” reminds us that on Hellenistic soil, the word “Christ” (the Greek term for “Messiah”) had little import for the hearers. The word “Lord,” on the other hand, had deep significance to Gentiles as well as to Jews. For those in the Roman world, it was the title given the emperor as supreme, even divine (*kyrios kaisaros* — “Caesar is Lord”). The earliest, most succinct of the Christian creeds was “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3).

News of the developing situation in Antioch was concerning to the believers in Jerusalem. Fearful that the mission was moving so rapidly as to be out of control, and worried that this might provoke more trouble from Jews who did not accept Jesus, the leaders in Jerusalem once again had to investigate. Whom to send? Because Barnabas was a Diaspora Jew from nearby Cyprus, he seemed a good fit for the task. His stature was growing so that he would later be called “apostle” by Luke (see 14:4, 14). It was the grace of God that they sent this great-hearted man! Twice before, by his sacrificial giving (4:36–37) and then by his sponsoring of Saul (9:27), he had lived out the meaning of his name (“The Encourager”). Now, once more, he brings encouragement. “When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (v. 23). So he stayed on to teach the new believers.

The growth of the church in Antioch soon necessitated additional help for Barnabas. He made the decision to “look for Saul” in Tarsus (see 9:30), another 80 miles to the northwest. It was now AD 40 and Saul had been back home

in Tarsus for four years, but he agreed to return with Barnabas. That choosing had far-reaching consequences. They teamed up to teach together for the next year. Their partnership would carry over into their first mission journey (13:2).

It was in Antioch that “the disciples were first called Christians” (v. 26). Was it initially a contemptuous nickname (says Barclay), or was it an identifying label by the Romans in Antioch to distinguish them from other religious groups? If the latter is true, this may have opened the door for persecution by the Romans themselves. As “Christians” they were no longer seen as a sect of Judaism and therefore no longer a “licit religion” (*religio licita*). Losing that label meant losing the protections that came with it.

Though the church was in its infancy, there was already developing an embryonic organization. The apostles had oversight of the whole church, and their chief tasks were “prayer and the ministry of the word.”



HELPING HANDS: AGABUS AND THE FAMINE

ACTS 11:27–30

Though the church was in its infancy, there was already developing an embryonic organization. The apostles had oversight of the whole church, and their chief tasks were “prayer and the ministry of the word” (6:4). Deacons (6:5–6) had been appointed to conduct food ministry for the widows. In this small section we read of two other kinds of leaders. In verse 30 comes the first mention of “elders” whose role will include being house church leaders (see 14:23). Also mentioned here are “prophets” (listed after “apostles” in Eph. 2:20 and 1 Cor. 12:28–29). The prophets’ task was both to “foretell” the future and to “forth-tell” the counsel of God for special situations or individuals.

Three of those prophets are named in Acts. Judas and Silas appear in 15:32, and Agabus is mentioned prominently here and in 21:10–11. Agabus foretold a “great famine all over the world,” one which came just a few years later during the days of Emperor Claudius, who ruled from AD 41–54. The disciples took Agabus seriously and began making provision for a relief offering, which they finally sent to Jerusalem “by the hand of Barnabas and Saul” (v. 30).

The prophecy of Agabus was important for the disciples, because difficulties and disasters then, as now, became the occasion for deeds of kindness and care. In addition, they provided a special opportunity for drawing Jew and Gentile together. Concern for relief of the saints in Jerusalem became one of Paul's permanent concerns (2 Cor. 8–9; Rom. 15:25–28, 31), for it was a way that he saw Gentiles being able to “give back” to the Jewish believers through whom they had received the blessings of Christ. So the two groups could be knit together.

The “famine visit” by Saul and Barnabas mentioned here is one of three Luke describes in Acts. The first was his initial trip there after his conversion to meet the leaders, a meeting during which Barnabas vouched for him to the others (9:26–29). The final one mentioned is his journey to the great council in Chapter 15. Barnabas is his companion in all three.

When Paul himself describes his interaction with the leaders in Jerusalem in Galatians 1–2, he mentions only two visits, a fact which has led to much discussion among scholars as to how the two visits mentioned in Galatians match up with the three in Acts, a conundrum since Galatians was almost certainly written after the council convened in AD 50. The simplest matchup, says Longenecker, seems to be as follows:

First visit (AD 36)	Acts 9:26–29	Gal. 1:18–20
Famine visit (AD 46)	Acts 11:27–30	Gal.2:1–10
Council visit (AD 50)	Acts 15	(no mention)

We will have more occasions to match the events narrated in Acts with the people, places, and events we read about in Paul's letters.

VIOLENT HANDS: KING HEROD'S OPPOSITION

ACTS 12:1–5

In AD 41 Rome withdrew her provincial governor from Caesarea and replaced him with Herod Agrippa I, possibly as a favor, since He had played a role in securing the throne for Emperor Claudius. This Herod (ruled AD 41–44) was extremely popular with the Jews and looked for ways to enhance his acceptance among the Jews. He found an answer in harrying the pestilential sect of Jesus that was gaining a large following in Judea.

Who was this “Herod”? Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great, who had ruled Judea nearly 40 years (40 BC – 1 BC). We remember Herod the Great as the monster of the Christmas story who massacred the infants of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1–19). That violence was in character, for he also murdered one of his wives and three of his sons, which prompted Caesar Augustus to say: “I would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son.” One of Herod the Great's sons who survived was Herod Antipas, who ruled from 4 BC to AD 39 and executed John the Baptist

(Matt. 14:1–12). It was to Antipas that Pilate sent Jesus for an audience before his crucifixion. Now Herod Agrippa I, the son of Antipas, was on the scene, and he continued their murderous ways.

“About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword” (v. 1), probably by beheading, as in John the Baptist’s case. James, one of Jesus’ “inner circle,” was the first of the Twelve to be put to death. Shortly afterward, Herod had Peter arrested, intending to kill him as well. We don’t know why James was singled out, but the arrest of Peter may have been prompted by news that he had baptized the Gentile (Roman!) Cornelius, angering Jews in Jerusalem. Peter’s arrest took place during the Passover festival, a time when neither trials nor executions were customarily allowed, though that custom had been ignored in Jesus’ case. The delay gave the church opportunity to make “earnest prayer” for Peter (v. 5).

AN ANGEL’S HAND RESCUES PETER

ACTS 12:6–19

Peter was guarded in Fortress Antonia by four “quaternions” (groups of four) of soldiers, one for each three-hour watch of the night. He was chained between two, while two others guarded the door, and it seemed impossible that he would escape death. But Herod’s “violent hands” were about to meet their match.

“And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell” (v. 7). The angel “struck” Peter with enough force to waken him. The “chains fell off his hands” and, at the angel’s command, Peter dressed himself. “Follow me,” he directed, and Peter mechanically obeyed, supposing that this was another “vision” (v. 9) like the one on the rooftop in Joppa. They passed the other two guards, who were almost certainly asleep and went through the large iron gate, which opened “of its own accord” (v. 10). Miraculous it was, but

no vision, Peter concluded, for though the angel departed, he was still standing on the moonlit street in the chill night air. The whole scene recalls Easter morning, when the Lord Jesus escaped both death and a sealed tomb while the guards slept (Matt. 27:64–28:4), another story in which angels figure prominently. This deliverance is now the second of three miraculous rescues from prison Luke narrates in Acts (see also 5:19 and 16:26).

Peter had enough sense not simply to bolt, but to make his way to the large home where “many were gathered together and were praying” (v. 12). It was the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Some scholars guess that this is the same house in which Jesus met with the Twelve in the “upper room,” the same one where the 120 were gathered on Pentecost! If so, it may help explain the frequent appearances of Mark and the increasing prominence of his cousin Barnabas. Tradition says that Mark employed Peter’s recollections when he composed the second of our Gospels and that he later went to Alexandria and became the first bishop there!

Peter “knocked at the door” and was greeted by one Rhoda, a servant girl who came to answer. Recognizing Peter’s voice, she ran joyfully to announce his presence, forgetting to let him in! For their part, the praying disciples had a hard time believing Rhoda’s story. Was it because no angel had rescued James? Was it because of the messenger herself, a youngster with a penchant for excitability? Were they betraying their own lack of faith in the very prayers they had been praying? Soon enough, they could all hear the persistent, increasingly loud knocking at the door. At last someone went to let him in.

As they listened with amazement, Peter told of his dramatic escape, and he insisted that they “tell these things to James and to the brothers” (v. 17). This James, most people believe, was Jesus’ own brother who is mentioned in Matt. 13:55. Though

he and the rest of the family had initially thought Jesus was “out of his mind” (Mark 3:21), he later came to faith, perhaps helped by a special appearance made to him by Jesus after the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7). In October 2002, an extraordinary stone box was announced to the world. It’s a small ossuary (bone-box), less than two feet long, but it bears the remarkable inscription in Aramaic: “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” Though its authenticity is still debated, there’s no doubt that the name it bears has a vast importance. This James became the head of the church in Jerusalem and the likely author of the Epistle of James.

Quickly, lest he be captured again, Peter departed, fleeing from Herod just as Jesus’ parents had taken him in flight from Herod’s grandfather (Matt. 2:13–15). The luckless guards back at Fortress Antonia would not escape Herod’s wrath. After a fruitless search for Peter, an angry Herod ordered that the sentries themselves be executed (v. 19), the usual penalty when a prisoner escaped. And what became of Peter? In addition to one more appearance at the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem nine years later, Peter’s travels took him to Antioch (Gal. 2:11) and ultimately to Rome, probably accompanied by his wife (1 Cor. 9:5). There, says tradition, he was martyred by crucifixion.

GOD’S HAND STRIKES DOWN HEROD

ACTS 12:20–25

And what happened to Herod? Luke tells us that the man who dared raise his violent hands against the church met his end at the mightier hands of an “angel of the Lord” (v. 23). Both Luke and Jewish historian

Josephus describe the scene which unfolded in AD 44 in the city of Caesarea. There Herod presided over some festivities attending the visit of a delegation from Tyre and Sidon seeking to patch up a quarrel with Herod. On the second day of the gathering, Herod entered the theater clad in a shimmering silver robe. He “delivered an oration” (v. 21) that provoked a flattering response: “The voice of a god, and not a man!” (v. 22).

“Immediately” an angel struck him down “because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last” (v. 23). His sudden, gruesome death has been variously explained as arsenic poisoning or appendicitis, resulting in peritonitis, aggravated by intestinal roundworms (Maier). Curiously, according to 2 Macc. 9:5–9, the notorious Antiochus Epiphanes died the same way. Just as the mighty hand of God once struck down the rebels Korah (Num. 26:10) and Dathan and Abiram (Deut. 11:6) in the wilderness and earlier in Acts had suddenly punished Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11), now it dispatched Herod.

So Herod died an awful death, but “the word of God increased and multiplied” (v. 24). Neither man nor famine could halt the proclamation of the Gospel and the growth of God’s Church (Smith). The hand of God once again proved mightier than the hands of any man!

The summary statement in 12:24 brings the section to an end (cf. 6:7 and 9:31). From this point on, Luke’s focus will be on the advance of the Gospel to the Gentiles and finally to Rome itself.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 13:1-52

Lord God, as I begin this study, remind me that You have a mission for me. Help me to discern it. Equip me and empower me by Your Spirit to obey Your direction and to bear a faithful witness to Jesus, my Savior and Lord! In His name, I ask it. Amen.

Review

1. Review what you learned about Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, and Herod Agrippa I. Besides their blood relationship, what thread runs through their stories?

2. Compile a list of the actions of Barnabas thus far in Acts. How does he live up to his name?

Acts 13:1-3

3. As we begin studying the “mission journeys,” let’s do some reflecting. What would you say is the “mission” of your congregation? What kind of “mission” has God given you personally?

4. What do we learn about the five men listed in verse 1? Look up any unfamiliar words Luke uses to describe them.

5. Is there anything in this section that seems foreign to our everyday experience of “church”? If so, why?

6. Who initially got the idea of making these journeys? How does this compare with Acts 8:26, 29?

7. How do you suppose the Spirit spoke to them? How do you expect the Spirit to speak to us today?

Acts 13:4-12

8. Who is “John”? See 12:25.

9. Describe the missionaries’ initial strategy in spreading the Gospel.

10. Locate a map of the eastern Mediterranean or one that depicts the “First Missionary Journey” of Paul (as in the *Concordia Self-Study Bible*). Locate the island of Cyprus and the cities of Salamis and Paphos. We will return to this map later.

11. Barnabas was a native of Cyprus. What might he and Paul have discussed on their voyage?

12. What do you think is the relationship between Sergius Paulus and Elymas? How is Elymas like Simon Magus (8:9–24)? How do they differ?

13. What changes in verse 9? Why might this be significant on a mission to Gentiles?

14. Compare verse 9 with Acts 1:10, 3:4, 7:55, 14:9, 23:1. What is the same in all these verses?

Acts 13:13–41

15. Track their progress on the map. Where do Paul and Barnabas go to make their first Gospel presentation (see verse 5)?

16. What “personnel” detail is reported in v. 13? What consequences will it have later for Paul and Barnabas (see Acts 15:36–40)?

17. Make a brief outline of Paul’s message in Pisidian Antioch. Whom does he address? What does Paul say about Jesus? What Scripture references does he employ? How is his sermon similar to that of Peter on Pentecost (re-read Acts 2:14–36)?

18. How do the sermons we hear in church in our day compare to the messages in Acts? What are some similarities and differences?

19. What contrasting reactions do the missionaries receive? What kind of opposition have you faced because of your faith? Did it make you stronger or make you clam up?

20. What significant step do they announce in vv. 46–48? How’s this news received?

Memory Challenge

Review what you have learned thus far.

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Mission Journeys Launched



Years ago children used to play a game called “I’m going on a trip.” Employing successive letters of the alphabet, they listed things they might take with them. “I’m going to take an apple...” said the first. The next player remembered what was said and added a word starting with the next letter: “I’m going to take an apple and a Bible... a car... a drink box...” and so on. Children had fun including wild ideas like kangaroos, pogo sticks, zebras, and xylophones!

If there was an actual trip to take, the parents had more serious lists to make. TripTiks from AAA. Suitcases with clothes that would match the weather and their planned activities (“Where’s my swim suit?”). Someone to watch the dog. A tune-up for the car. Don’t forget the camera! The longer the trip, the more elaborate the preparations. And there could be serious disagreements about the itinerary. Which relatives to see? How long to stay with each? What “fun stops” could everyone agree on?

The second half of Acts brings us the story of four long trips. Three are the well-known “mission journeys” of Paul and his companions. The fourth was his voyage as a prisoner that brought him to Rome at last. We’re told little about the planning that might have gone into these trips. Nothing about what they included in their “packing lists.” The itinerary was, to some degree, “to be announced” as the Holy Spirit led them and as the response of listeners brought unexpected, sometimes spur-of-the-moment decisions about where to go next. On the other hand, Luke is generous with details about what happened as the journeys unfolded. The stories comprise one of the Bible’s most fascinating narratives.

The first mission journey would last two years and nearly cost them their lives. But what wondrous things unfolded on this trip! Come along, invites Luke. Watch, listen, and marvel at the working of God and the power of His Word.

A full thirteen years elapsed between the conversion of Saul on the Damascus road and the launching of this first mission journey. What was Saul doing all that time? As with Jesus, Saul's life is marked by some "silent years" where we know little except that God was at work forming him as His "chosen instrument."



"SET APART BARNABAS AND SAUL"

ACTS 13:1-3

It had been fifteen years or so since that momentous week that changed the world in the spring of AD 30 — the week of Jesus' death and resurrection (most scholars place the date somewhere between AD 29–33). A full thirteen years elapsed between the conversion of Saul on the Damascus road and the launching of this first mission journey. What was Saul doing all that time? As with Jesus, Saul's life is marked by some "silent years" where we know little except that God was at work forming him as His "chosen instrument" (9:15). A rudimentary chronology of Paul's life will help us appreciate the sequence of events that plays out. While there is considerable uncertainty, a reasonable starter outline of events until this journey is as follows:

- AD 33 – Saul's conversion, followed by a "monastic sort of existence, probably at an oasis in the Arabian desert near Damascus" for three years (Maier), then back to Damascus for debate and teaching.
- AD 36 – First trip to Jerusalem, meeting with Peter and James, then to Tarsus for nine years of evangelism and teaching.
- AD 45 – Barnabas brings Saul to Antioch for a year of team ministry.
- AD 46 – The first mission journey is launched. It lasts two years.

The first journey originates in Antioch. As the story begins, the camera zooms in for a close-up of five men, identified as "prophets and teachers," who were "worshiping the Lord and fasting." We recognize Barnabas and Saul, who have been ministry partners here in Antioch for a year. Three others are named: "Simeon, who was called Niger,

Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch [Antipas]...” (v. 1). Since “Niger” means “dark” or even “black” and Cyrene is a city in North Africa, Simeon and Lucius are likely both African. Some have even wondered if Simeon is the same person as the “Simon of Cyrene” mentioned in Luke 23:26 who bore the cross for Jesus.

Whose idea was this mission trip? In our day, ministry plans are often the product of “planning councils,” leaders on retreat, or someone’s bright idea. But here Luke makes clear that the impetus comes directly from God. During one of those worshipful times, “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (v. 2). We’re not told how the Spirit made this clear, any more than we know how the Spirit spoke to Philip in the desert (8:26, 29). In any case, the disciples in Antioch are satisfied that they have heard God clearly, and they “laid their hands on them and sent them off” (v. 3).

A BEGINNING IN CYPRUS

ACTS 13:4–12

Just why they chose to start with Cyprus is not made clear. The fact that Barnabas was named first in the Spirit’s directive in v. 2 (as also in 11:25!) may indicate that Barnabas was initially designated the leader. Since he was from Cyprus, perhaps it was his suggestion that they proceed there, to begin with the known before going to the unknown. It seems likely that on the 130-mile voyage there, if not earlier, he would have provided Saul some background about the island, its people, and its religious practices.

Cyprus was a Roman province known for its copper mines and its shipbuilding industry. Generally pleasant weather gave it the nickname Makaria (“Happy Island”). Its two most important cities were Salamis on the island’s east end and the provincial capital Paphos, about 90 miles to the west. Paphos was the site of a temple of Venus, the goddess of love.

The missionary team was a company of three. Along with Barnabas and Saul came John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, who had come back to Antioch with them after their journey to Jerusalem (12:25). John Mark’s role is encapsulated in the Greek word *hypeeretees*, which in Luke’s Gospel indicates a synagogue attendant (Luke 4:20), a man who had charge of the scrolls. This has caused some scholars to guess that John Mark was to take care of whatever Scriptures they had brought and possibly to serve as a catechist for the new converts they would make (Longenecker).

The missionaries’ initial strategy, duplicated in every place Paul went, was to start in the synagogue at Salamis, preaching to the Jews. From there they made their way west. In Paphos they were summoned by the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a “man of intelligence” who “sought to hear the word of God” (v. 7). This man is probably the same L. Sergius Paulus mentioned in a Roman inscription as “Curator of the Banks and Beds of the Tiber” (a flood control commissioner!). As well as satisfying his own personal curiosity, this summons for the missionaries to appear was probably meant to be an official inquiry into the nature of what they were proclaiming.

The first major outreach of the Gospel from Jerusalem had encountered Simon Magus the sorcerer in Samaria (8:9–24). The first major outreach from Antioch now encountered the false prophet Bar-Jesus. This man was also known as Elymas, which means “sorcerer” or “fortune-teller.” We do not know if he was a “hanger on” who had wormed his way into the proconsul’s court or if Sergius Paulus had deliberately sought him out, but it became immediately clear to him that if Paul succeeded in this mission, he was out of a job!

Robert Smith sets the scene for us: “Paul stood before Sergius Paulus like Moses, heckled and rivalled by the magicians of the Egyptian court (Ex. 7:11–12, 22; 8:18).” It must have been a

memorable confrontation, for Luke vividly describes Paul's intense look (compare other "intense looks" in Acts 1:10, 3:4, 7:55, 14:9, 23:1), followed by a very un-Moses-like eruption of anger at Elymas: "You son of the devil...will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?" (v. 10). Now Paul, who himself once was "blind... for a time," pronounces the same fate on his heckler (v. 11)! Elymas is stricken and must be led by the hand, just as Paul was led into Damascus years earlier. It is the first of many miraculous things he will do, and Sergius Paulus, duly impressed, becomes a believer, the first of many converts won on this journey.

We have been calling him Paul, for Luke records his name change from Hebrew "Saul" to Greek "Paul" in 13:9. It is his name from now on, appropriate for his travels and work among Gentiles. Some writers have wondered whether it was adopted in honor of Sergius Paulus, his first convert. The name literally means "small." Was it descriptive of his physical stature? There are extra-biblical hints that it was. The earliest portraits of Paul in the Roman catacombs show him as a smallish man with a pointed beard. The apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which recounts his ministry in Galatia, describes him in less-than-ideal terms: "a man small in stature with a bald head and crooked legs... full of friendliness"! In any case, his new name "Paul" surely reflected his spiritual transformation from the pompousness of a Pharisee to the lowliness of being Christ's slave (Rom. 1:1), the "least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:9).

MARK'S DESERTION AND PAUL'S SPEECH

ACTS 13:13–41

Paul and Barnabas made their way north to "Perga in Pamphylia" (v. 13) on the mainland. Upon their arrival, Luke reports that John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. There is no explanation. Why did he leave the company so soon? Was he ill? Was he homesick for his mother, as one ancient writer suggested? Others wonder if John Mark was upset because, in his view, Paul took leadership of the mission away from Barnabas. Whatever the reason, it was a large enough concern that later Paul refused to take him along on a second journey since he had "withdrawn from" them (the NIV says "deserted" — see Acts 15:36–40), provoking an argument with Barnabas that caused a split. Thankfully, the story had a happy ending. When John Mark re-emerged 20 years later, Paul wrote to Timothy, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me" (2 Tim. 4:11). Time and grace had done their healing work.

Meanwhile, instead of staying in Perga, Paul and Barnabas pressed on toward the interior, crossing the Taurus Mountains and ascending 4000 feet by one of the hardest roads in the region, a road also frequented by bandits! Their destination was yet another of the 16 cities named Antioch, this one known as "the Antioch of Pisidia," part of an area incorporated into the Roman province of Galatia. "It is possible," writes Paul Maier, "that Paul and Barnabas had originally aimed for Antioch on the recommendation of Sergius Paulus, because archeology has shown that the family of the governor of Cyprus had important roots in that city."

Once again they began in the synagogue as they had in Salamis (v. 5). After the Shema, the blessings, and readings from the Torah and the prophets, there was opportunity for a free address by any competent male present. Perhaps Paul's dress proclaimed him a Pharisee and thereby opened the way for an invitation to speak. So it was that Paul stood and made the longest of his three mission journey speeches recorded by Luke (see also 14:15–17 and 17:22–31).

The message Paul preached that day bears marked similarities to Peter's Pentecost sermon (**P**) and Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin (**S**), as noted in the outline that follows:

Address to "Men of Israel and you who fear God" (v. 16)

Review of Israel's history from patriarchs to David (vv. 17–22) (**S**)

God chose the patriarchs/ redeemed Israel from Egypt/ endured them in the wilderness/ gave them the land of Canaan/ gave them judges and kings/ raised up David

Proclamation of "a Savior, Jesus" (vv. 23–31) (**P**)

He is "of [David's] offspring"/ John the Baptist proclaimed repentance "to all the people of Israel" and announced "one who is coming"/ Jewish rulers condemned Him, had Him executed, and "laid him in a tomb"/ but "God raised him from the dead" and "he appeared" to many "who are now his witnesses"

All this has fulfilled prophecy (vv. 32–37) (**P and S**)

Ps. 2:7; Is. 55:3 and Ps. 16:10 all testify to His resurrection

Closing appeal and warning (vv. 38–41) (**P**)

Forgiveness and freedom for "everyone who believes"/ Warning against scoffing (citing Hab. 1:5) as a closing exhortation.

These early Christian sermons by Peter and Paul are striking in their employment of the Old Testament, something many modern-day Christian preachers neglect. We can also see the shaping of the "kerygma" (the essential Gospel proclamation) used by early Christians. The heart of that message is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, along with the apostolic claim that "we are witnesses." These sermons also consistently offer forgiveness of sins to those who will believe the Good News. This too is a lesson for preachers who assume that people know "the basics" about Jesus and neglect the heart of the Gospel message or its astonishing offer of amnesty.

CONTRASTING REACTIONS

ACTS 13:42-52

Jesus' inaugural sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth provoked initial approval of his "gracious words," then shortly afterward "wrath" as he concluded (Luke 4:22-28). Now Luke describes how Paul's preaching of Jesus elicits the same two dramatically different reactions just a week apart at the synagogue in Antioch.

The first reaction is a hunger to hear this Gospel news again. "The people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath" (v. 42). Among the congregation that day were "Jews and devout converts to Judaism [the Greek word is *proseelyto*]" (v. 43), indicating Gentiles who had previously converted to Judaism. The eager listeners followed them out and were urged to continue in the "grace" of God, a word that became a centerpiece in all of Paul's letters.

The next Sabbath, "almost the whole city" gathered once more at the synagogue, says Luke hyperbolically. It was Christmas and Easter and chairs in the aisles and "people we've never seen in here before"! The synagogue was being flooded by Gentiles as though it were a common theater (says Longenecker), provoking the local Jewish leaders into an angry panic. No one had ever been this interested in what THEY had to say, and they were "filled with jealousy" (v. 45), the same reaction the high priest and his associates had exhibited toward the apostles (5:17). Their initial interest and curiosity turned to open antagonism.

Their reaction, in turn, provokes Paul and Barnabas to take a significant step. There will be, henceforth, a new policy, a new thrust in their mission: "we are turning to the Gentiles!" (v. 46). But this was no innovation of their own. Citing Is. 49:6, they made it clear that this was God's own mandate: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles" (v. 47). One wonders if Paul and Barnabas had discussed this on the way to Antioch and agreed what they would do if they met this response.

For their part, the Gentiles rejoiced, and many came to faith. There was no containing the joy brought by the Holy Spirit (v. 52). An evangelistic chain reaction began to spread the Gospel message "throughout the whole region" (v. 49). Unable to quarantine this "holy infection" (as Paul Bretscher calls it) or confine it to the synagogue where they had control, the Jewish leaders pressured the city magistrates through their "god-fearing" wives (the Greek implies that the women were participants in the synagogue) to drive the missionaries out of the district. In a gesture recalling the instruction of Jesus to His disciples for just such occasions (Luke 9:5), they "shook off the dust from their feet" as a symbolically enacted curse against their detractors and set out for Iconium, nearly 100 miles to the east.

It was a scene that would be repeated on this journey and those to come. It is the two-fold reaction the Gospel still provokes wherever people have the courage to speak it.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 14:1–28

Lord God, let the story of Paul and Barnabas inspire me to take the risk of speaking up for You. Let it also humble me to know that it's about You and not me! For Jesus' sake, I ask it. Amen.

Review

1. What are some discoveries you've made about Paul? What most surprises you about his story thus far?

2. Review the itinerary of this first mission journey and a possible reason for their decision to begin with Cyprus.

3. What are some key elements of the earliest Christian sermons as recorded in Acts?

Acts 14:1–7

4. Before reading Chapter 14, find Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe on a map. What can you discover about these cities from Bible footnotes or from an internet search?

5. In what way is the apostles' experience at Pisidian Antioch repeated at Iconium? What's different? How long do they stay? Why do they finally take leave?

6. Note in v. 4 the plural "apostles" is used. Evidently Barnabas is now considered to be an apostle. If so, what is an "apostle"? Have the qualifications changed since Acts 1:21–22?

7. How does Luke say that "the Lord" (Jesus) was at work in Iconium?

Acts 14:8–19

8. What occurrence prompted the townspeople to attempt to worship Paul and Barnabas? What does the "priest of Zeus" plan to do?

9. What kind of "worshipful" attention is given to people in our day? What do you think prompts such displays?

10. Paul and Barnabas "tore their clothes." What does this act mean? (See Gen. 37:29; 2 Sam. 1:11–12; Job 1:20; Esther 4:1). Have you had an experience that made you want to do something like this?

11. How does Paul's impromptu "sermon" to the crowd differ from the earlier sermons we have read in Acts 2 and 13? What does he say about God to them?

12. Paul (not Barnabas?!) is stoned by the crowd. How does this event recall Jesus' words to Ananias (9:16) and Paul's earlier experience (7:58)?

13. Timothy was from Lystra. Read 2 Tim. 3:10-11. Do you think he might have been witness to all this?

Acts 14:20-28

14. What was Paul's reaction to his "near death" experience? What does this tell you about this man?

15. What steps do Paul and Barnabas take to ensure the future of the fledgling congregations in these towns?

16. What role do you think the "elders" (v. 23) were to play? How does their selection differ from the way we choose pastors nowadays? Why?

17. How does Luke summarize the "mission report" that Paul and Barnabas make back home?

18. Based on what you have read, would you call the first journey an unqualified success, only somewhat successful, or a "near disaster"? Using the same criteria, how would you describe the "success" or "failure" of your own congregation?

19. How does the story of this mission journey challenge you personally? What have you learned from the record of this mission trip that you would like to imitate?

Memory Challenge

ACTS 14:15 *"We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth."* **OR**

ACTS 14:22 *"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."*

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The First Journey Completed



HOW DO WE SPELL “SUCCESS”?

How do we determine if something we’ve done was successful? One way is to judge it “by the numbers.” What percentage of correct answers did the student get on the final exam? How many wins did the team accumulate during the season? What was the company’s “bottom line”? The nation’s GNP?

Congregations and pastors often do that. We may not use the word “successful,” but we like to point to numbers to reassure ourselves we are doing a good job. Did we meet the budget? Did attendance hold steady, or even rise a bit? How many members do we have compared to a year ago, five years ago? Numbers we provide on our annual reports can be the source of either joy or gloom.

The Bible does not often use the word “success,” and when it does, numbers aren’t normally involved. Wise Solomon says we will “find... good success in the sight of God and man” if we remember and obey God’s teaching, if we embrace love and faithfulness (Prov. 3:4). God reminded Joshua to adhere to the law that Moses had commanded. If he did, he would have success (Joshua 1:7). Success for God’s servants, of course, may not be measurable in numbers. Jeremiah did what God commanded, but for 23 years practically no one listened (Jer. 25:3). We do not brand him a failure, for he had been faithful. Not a few discouraged pastors have been reminded by loving parishioners that being “faithful” is more important than numerical success. Wise words!

Was the first mission journey “successful”? We can look at numbers like the following: a) it lasted more than a year, b) it covered 1,500 grueling miles, c) the company of missionaries shrank from three to two. Yes, the missionaries saw numerical growth, but they also encountered angry opposition.



In the Book of Acts, however, Luke seems to enjoy making repeated “progress reports,” many of which involve numbers. “Three thousand souls” were added on Pentecost, and the number of the “men” shortly thereafter swelled to 5,000 (4:4). In the face of opposition, he relishes saying, the church kept increasing in number (6:1, 7; 9:31; 11:21, 24; 14:1, 21; 16:5; 17:12). Kept in perspective, numbers can and do matter. At least sometimes.

Was the first mission journey “successful”? We can look at numbers like the following: a) it lasted more than a year, b) it covered 1,500 grueling miles, c) the company of missionaries shrank from three to two. Yes, the missionaries saw numerical growth, but they also encountered angry opposition. Before it was over, Paul was stoned by a mob and dragged out of town. How would the journey be evaluated when (and if!) they got back home? What would YOU have said?

SUCCESS AND OPPOSITION IN ICONIUM

ACTS 14:1-7

The missionaries made their way southeast from Antioch along an excellent road, the Via Sebaste, that Roman engineers had constructed in 6 BC. Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe lay along that road in the southern part of the province of Galatia.

Iconium was 80 miles from Antioch. It was Greek in culture and resistant to Roman influence. Lystra, on the other hand, was a haven for retired Roman army veterans the emperor had sent there to settle. Only 24 miles southeast of Iconium, it was much more distant culturally, and the rest of the populace was mostly uneducated Lycaonians who spoke their own native dialect. The final city, Derbe, was another sixty miles down the Via Sebaste. We know that Derbe was a border city, but little else about it except that one Gaius from that town (20:4) later accompanied Paul on his third mission trip.

Iconium nearly duplicated their experience in Antioch. Once more they began at the synagogue (v. 1). Once more there was a response of faith by many. And once more, as happened at Antioch, a number of “unbelieving Jews” (v. 2, cf. 13:45, 50) stirred up opposition to them. But instead of a quick exit, the team “remained for a long time” teaching the new believers (v. 3). Luke makes special note of the help of the ascended Lord Jesus, who “bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done” (v. 3) by the apostles. Their miraculous deeds, it appears, lent weight to their preaching. Interestingly, “apostles” is in the plural, an indication that Barnabas had come to be reckoned as an “apostle” alongside Paul and the Twelve.

The apostolic qualification mentioned in 1:21–22 (being one who had accompanied Jesus in His earthly mission) had dropped away. Paul had his own encounter with the risen Christ at Damascus, and Richard Longenecker guesses that Barnabas may have been a witness at one of Jesus' resurrection appearances. Both men were set apart by the Holy Spirit, sent of a mission. The word "apostle," in fact, means "one sent."

Eventually there came a "plot" (the Greek *hormee* connotes an impulsive action) against them. This sudden, emotional outburst transformed their opponents into a potential lynch mob and compelled the missionaries to flee the city. They headed to Lystra, where they "continued to preach the gospel" (v. 7).

ADULATION AND STONING IN LYSTRA

ACTS 14:8–19

Now comes a strange turn in this story. After nearly being lynched in one place, they are deified in the next! It began with the healing of a man "crippled from birth" (v. 8), an incident that immediately brings to mind the earlier healing of a man lame from birth by Peter (3:1–8) and another by Jesus Himself (Luke 5:18–26). Luke's description is riveting. We see Paul's intense look, we hear his loud command, then witness a sudden, startling response by the man: "he sprang up and began walking" (v. 10). It was, says Smith, "too much for the crowd that had gathered." Abandoning their accustomed Greek, they began shouting in their native tongue, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" (v. 11). The dumbfounded missionaries heard the crowd hailing Barnabas as Zeus, the chief Greek god, and Paul as Hermes, the divine messenger. Before they knew it, the local "priest of Zeus" was bringing oxen adorned with garlands for a public sacrifice (v. 13)!

Lest we laugh at the naivete of the Lystrans, we should know that there was a simple, compelling

reason behind the crowd's worshipful response. Many of the Lycaonians had grown up hearing an old legend, retold fifty years earlier by Roman poet Ovid, that Zeus and Hermes once visited "the Phrygian hill country" ("our own neighborhood") disguised as mortals seeking lodging. No one paid them any heed until one poor old couple, Philemon and his wife Baucis, welcomed them with a banquet beyond their means. After destroying the homes of the inhospitable folks, the gods transformed the old couple's home of straw into a temple and transformed the couple into two beautiful trees that would live on there.

Seeing the miraculous healing, the people of Lystra wondered if perhaps lightning had struck twice in the same place. Since they didn't want their homes destroyed too, they determined to get it right this time and give these "gods" a proper welcome! That the people shouted in Lycaonian (v. 11) explains why the apostles were slow to understand their intent. But the sight of the oxen and their garlands, and possibly of knives being sharpened for the sacrificial slaughtering, brought home to Paul and Barnabas what was about to happen.

Their reaction was unmistakable. They "tore their garments" and rushed out into the crowd in a desperate bid to halt the proceedings. Luke's readers knew very well the meaning of that symbolic gesture by which Reuben grieved the selling of Joseph to slavers (Gen. 37:29), David lamented the death of Saul in battle (2 Sam. 1:11–12), and Job responded to reports that he had lost his possessions and children in a single day (Job 1:20). To tear one's clothes was to cry out with unmistakable emotion, "This is awful!"

They erupted with an extemporaneous but eloquent appeal that fit the hearers, who knew little or nothing of Jewish history and the scriptural prohibitions against idolatry Paul and Barnabas knew by heart. So instead of quoting

Scriptures, they entreated the people using things they could see every day: “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men of like nature with you... turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea” (v. 15). Their appeal was to nature rather than to Scripture. They reminded the people that God did not show up in disguise and then demolish homes. Instead He made His witness by leaving a trail of blessing in their lives, “giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (v. 17). The assertion of God’s patience with past generations before the present day’s “good news” was meant to prepare them for hearing more about the new life Jesus would bring, but the apostles did not get the chance to say more, for once again their adversaries burst on the scene. There comes a dramatic mood swing in a single verse: “Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul” (v. 19)!

“Was it frustration at their misidentification that helped the crowd lend ready ears to adversaries who had just made a special trip... to denounce the apostles?” asks Paul Maier. How much time elapsed between deification and mob violence we are not told, but the crowd succeeded in surrounding Paul (where was Barnabas?) and stoning him. One rock found its mark and bashed him into unconsciousness. Supposing him dead, the crowd “dragged him out of the city” (v. 19). But it was not so. A handful of grieving “disciples,” presumably earlier converts from

Lystra, gathered around him and discovered that he was still alive.

In what must have appeared almost a resurrection, Paul “rose up and entered the city” once more. Astonishing boldness on his part, following an astonishing deliverance on God’s part! The next day, without missing a beat, he and Barnabas continued down the road to Derbe. The 60-mile journey gave him plenty of time to realize what Stephen had endured at his own hands (7:58) and to ponder the words Jesus had spoken to Ananias: “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (9:16). Later Paul would write to the Galatians, the people of that same area, “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Gal. 6:17). Were some of those the scars from his stoning?

Something else may have happened at Lystra that Luke does not here report. There was a young man living there named Timothy (16:1) who likely witnessed the drama we have just described. Timothy became a disciple and eventually one of Paul’s trusted companions. Paul wrote to him years later, “You... have followed my teaching, my conduct... my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra... yet from them all the Lord rescued me” (2 Tim. 3:10–11). Paul’s courage, along with his words, made a powerful impression on Timothy and others, as once again God brought good from evil — blessing from what was suffered for the name of Jesus.

RETURNING AND REPORTING IN ANTIOCH

ACTS 14:20-28

Paul and Barnabas had run a veritable gauntlet, facing a false prophet, verbal abuse, a deadly plot and stoning by an angry mob. They had finished their preaching work on a high note in Derbe, where they “won a large number of disciples” (v. 21 NIV). No one would have blamed them for singing a hearty “hallelujah,” packing up, and heading east for home down that Roman road. Instead, they made an about-face and began retracing their steps westward, a decision that must have taken considerable courage, given what they had just endured.

Back through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch they journeyed, “strengthening the disciples” in each place (v. 22 NIV). It wasn’t enough, they knew, simply to plant the Gospel seed and wish the believers well. The baby churches needed care if they were to grow up to maturity. So they took the step of appointing “elders” (Greek *presbyterous*) in each place to provide shepherdly care (note his words later to the “elders” of the church in Ephesus, 20:17, 28). Because the believers were neophytes, the apostles took the step of doing the appointing. Later, as they matured, these congregations would be ready to choose their own leaders. Along with new leaders, the apostles left an important reminder: “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” We MUST! Such suffering was not merely normal, but even “necessary” in a hostile world, as Jesus Himself proved. The apostles had been a living demonstration of that.

On their homeward journey, there came one more stop in Perga. This time they took opportunity to speak the Word there, though Luke furnishes no further details about it. Their work finally completed, they sailed the 300 miles home to Antioch, where they made their report to the church.

Their report, as Luke narrates it here, contains neither mileage totals nor the number of souls added to the church, though he has done so in other places (2:41 and 4:4). Though doubtless they told the story in captivating detail to the gathered listeners, Luke chooses to summarize how they viewed the journey in a single sentence: “They declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.” That, after all, is the great story unfolding in Acts — how the Gospel traveled from Jerusalem to Rome, from Jew to Gentile.

Of special importance for us today is that we keep the Subject of their report the Subject of our church’s life and work. Not what “we did,” but what “God did”! We take a lesson from this journey and their report about it. Let God be God, trust that He will be at work in what we venture for His sake (1 Cor. 15:58), and give Him the glory for the good things that happen. That’s what makes for “success” in our life and work together, isn’t it? Not finally the numbers, but the presence and activity of the Lord through His Word.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 15:1-35

Lord God, as I study the Word in this chapter, remind me that the church will always face conflict. But help me also to see that conflict brings opportunity for You to be at work, so that we may finally give You glory. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Review

1. List the positive and negative responses the missionaries received in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. What does the list teach us?

2. What attitudes or actions of the apostles would you like to imitate? Be specific.

Acts 15:1-5

3. COUNCILS form a significant part of the history of the church. Choose one of the following and find out what you can about it online:

Nicea Trent Vatican II

(e.g. **Where** did it meet? **When?** **What** was the chief issue before it?)

4. What is meant by “the church” in verse 3? In verse 4? How are “apostles and elders” to be distinguished from “the church”?

5. Have you ever been to a larger church gathering (a district/synod convention, perhaps) where some contentious issues were raised? How did the issues get resolved?

6. What’s the big issue before the church in this section?

7. If you were a new Gentile believer, how would you have felt about the proposed requirement in v. 1?

Acts 15:6-21

8. Who is meeting in this section? (contrast verse 6 with verse 22)

9. What testimony is offered by Peter (7-11)? How is this significant, given his background (recall 10:14!)

10. What testimony is offered by Paul and Barnabas (12)? How is this significant, given Paul’s history as a Pharisee and Barnabas’ as a Levite?

11. What does James add to the discussion?

12. What proposal does he offer to help “clear the logjam”?

List the four specifics:

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

Can you locate any footnoted references to help explain what these meant?

13. How would this proposal appeal to Jewish believers? To Gentiles?

14. One writer suggested that the council was trying to preserve two things:

(1) The **Unity** of the church... (2) The **Holiness** of the church...

Which of these has more weight for you?

Acts 15:22–35

15. The council decides to send a delegation with a letter. Who are the four men who will make the trip? Why these?

16. Take a closer look at the letter. From whom? To whom? Does the letter strike you as

a) too long? b) too short? c) just right?

If you chose a) or b), how would you change it?

17. How was the letter delivered? With what spirit was it received?

18. Let’s apply this study to our own day. What are a few of the more significant issues that face the church just NOW? If you had authority to summon church leaders worldwide to discuss any of them, which one would you address?

Memory Challenge

Review what you have learned thus far.



ACTS

ACTS 15:1-35

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The Council in Jerusalem

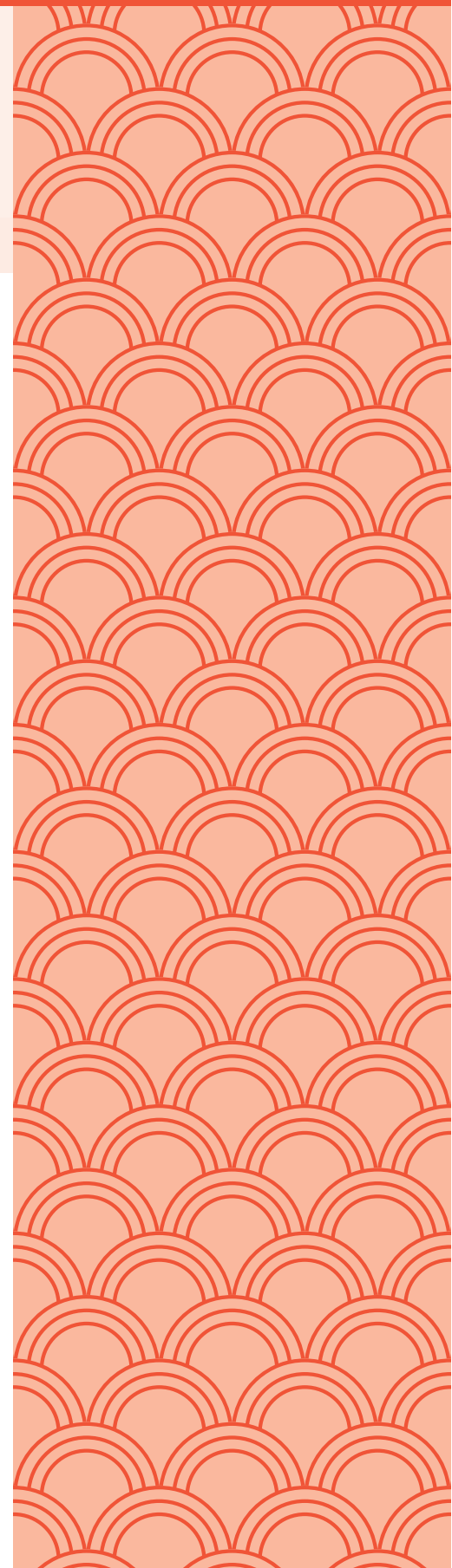


CHURCH COUNCILS AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

If you have ever been to a large church gathering such as a district or synod convention, you likely noticed that some contentious issues were addressed. How shall we interpret the Bible? What's to be the role of women? Shall we recognize same-sex marriage? What's the relationship between science and religion? How about those changing worship practices? Or the level of fellowship to be expressed between denominations? Sometimes discussions are heated. Sometimes consensus is elusive.

That's nothing new! The church has always faced a daunting array of questions that needed resolution. When those issues were too large and too significant to be ignored, such as heresies or practices that threatened the teaching and the unity of the church, its leaders gathered in “councils” to address those problems and find agreement. Sadly, the efforts were not always successful.

Over the centuries there have been dozens of such councils. For example, the first Council of Nicea in AD 325 addressed the heresy called Arianism (represented by modern-day Jehovah's Witnesses). The eventual result was the Nicene Creed. The Council of Trent met in northern Italy from AD 1545–1563 to respond to the Protestant Reformation and the article of justification in particular. It urged a “counter-Reformation”! Some councils succeeded, some failed. Because of the divisions in the church,



it has been well-nigh impossible to have a truly “ecumenical” gathering of all denominations for the last 1,000 years. What’s more, as Luther pointed out, councils “have often erred.”

The very first church council is described in Acts 15. The date was AD 49 or 50, some 20 years after the resurrection. The problem was “What shall we do with the Gentiles?” Must a Gentile, before he becomes a Christian, first become a Jew? Must he be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses? How closely could Jews and Gentiles associate in the ordinary social life of the church? Acts 15 tells how the believers answered these questions.

WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THE GENTILES?

ACTS 15:1-4

In the first decades of the church, all Christians were Jews who had come to accept Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah and received baptism. They still attended the synagogue and the temple and observed the Mosaic Law. Then came the great breakthrough to the Gentile world. Peter’s encounter with Cornelius in Caesarea and the missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas had produced a host of Gentile believers. These people turned from the worship of idols, called Jesus “Lord,” and received baptism. But they were not circumcised and did not observe the bulk of the Mosaic Law. For the Jewish believers back home in Judea, the influx of the Gentiles presented a vexing set of problems. Chief among those was the issue of whether or not they should be compelled to receive circumcision and observe the Law of Moses.

Those who said “yes” organized and traveled north to Antioch. These men from “the circumcision party” (11:2-3 and Gal. 2:12) saw Paul as a threat, a man who wanted to nullify what God had spoken in the Old Testament. Doubtless they saw themselves as defenders of

the faith. Accordingly, they “were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’” (v. 1). No one, we must say clearly, was arguing against the inclusion of Gentiles in the church. The issue had been framed around the question of *how* they were to be received. Was it to be through “Moses *and* Christ”? Was it to be “Moses *or* Christ”? The debate was on! “Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them” (v. 2). At stake was the unity of the infant church, for if the disagreement was not resolved, the community would rupture into two rival churches!

To their credit, the people of the church in Antioch decided neither to avoid the issue nor to choose sides without more reflection. This was a matter that needed the whole church to reach agreement, so they appointed Paul and Barnabas and “some others” to take the matter to Jerusalem. Though Luke does not mention him, the group likely included Titus, one of Paul’s Greek converts, a man who had not been circumcised (see Gal. 2:1). “The church” in Antioch (v. 3) was expressing its solidarity with “the church” in Jerusalem (v. 4) by urging a meeting. The terms here indicate the entire congregation of believers in each city, as distinct from “the apostles and elders” (v. 4), who provided oversight to the Jerusalem congregation and the whole of the Christian movement at the time.

As the delegation from Antioch traveled to Jerusalem, they told the believers in Phoenicia and Samaria the news of “how the Gentiles had been converted” (v. 3 NIV). These Christians, themselves converts from outside the old Jewish fold (see 8:4-25 and 11:19), probably took a broader view of the news than the folks in Jerusalem. But even there the greetings were mostly positive (“they were welcomed”—v. 4). The dissenters faced an uphill fight.

THE DEBATE UNFOLDS

ACTS 15:5-18

Who are the attendees at this “council”? The initial gathering where Paul and Barnabas make their report of the events of their mission journey is clearly a “plenary” session including “the church and the apostles and the elders” (v. 4). After the missionaries’ report, “some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up” (v. 5 NIV). They repeated the concern raised in verse 1 about circumcision and expanded it. “It is necessary to circumcise [the Gentiles] and to order them to keep the law of Moses” (v. 5). Commentators are divided about what transpired next. Verse 6 speaks of the “apostles and elders” gathering to consider this matter. Was this a “leaders’ caucus,” as Robert Smith thinks, citing Gal. 2:2 (“privately before those who seemed influential”)? Or was it “all the assembly,” as verse 12 seems to imply, as Richard Longenecker thinks? In any case, by the time a final decision was reached and a plan of action decided, it was once more “the apostles and the elders, with the whole church” (v. 22). Curiously, Luke does not mention John, who was so prominent in earlier chapters.

The council sessions featured “much debate” (v. 7), and then a succession of significant speakers who responded to the circumcision party. The first is Peter, who is no longer the chief figure in the Jerusalem church (James had at some time earlier assumed that role — see 12:17). Peter speaks now as a missionary, recounting the events with

Cornelius ten years earlier as if to make clear that Paul was no innovator or rebel, for “God... bore witness to [the Gentiles]... and he made no distinction between us and them” (vv. 8–9). His testimony would hold weight because everyone knew how strictly he had held out for the observance of the Mosaic legislation (10:14). Now he calls it a “yoke,” a term the rabbis were accustomed to using. Jesus had spoken of a different and easier kind of yoke (Matt. 11:29). Paul would make clear to the Galatians that to submit to the Old Testament regulations was to adopt a “yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). “We Jews haven’t been able to bear that yoke!” Peter says in effect. “Why place it on the necks of new Gentile believers?” (v. 10). Instead, he says, “we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (v. 11). It was one of the clearest statements to date about salvation by grace — Peter said it before Paul wrote it!

Now Barnabas and Paul took the spotlight. These two, all were aware, had a solid background as observant Jews — Paul a Pharisee and Barnabas a Levite. As they had done in Antioch (14:27) and then in Phoenicia and Samaria (15:3), once more they gave an account of God’s “signs and wonders... done through them among the Gentiles,” while the whole assembly, even the circumcision party, “fell silent” to listen intently (v. 12). Note that the accounts of Peter and Barnabas and Paul were not so much reasoned arguments as testimonies of the mighty acts of God. Who could argue with Him?

James' judgment includes his well-known proposal that a letter be sent out to the Gentile believers urging four "abstentions" designed to insure the continued unity of the church.



JAMES RENDERS HIS JUDGMENT

ACTS 15:19–21

The parties had made their cases. The church had listened carefully. Now James, the leader of the church who was also known as “James the Just” because of his piety, renders his “judgment” (v. 19). Making no reference to Barnabas and Paul, perhaps to avoid appearing biased, he begins by referring to Peter’s presentation. Instead of calling him “Peter,” he calls him “Simeon,” his Hebrew name (cf. 2 Pet. 1:1). He notes that God Himself had taken the initiative, that He had made the Gentiles “a people (Greek *laos*) for his name,” thus applying to the Gentile believers a designation formerly used of Israel alone (Longenecker). To that testimony of the earlier speakers he adds a final one — the weightiest of all. “With this the words of the prophets agree” (v. 15)! Quoting Amos 9:11–12 (the Septuagint version, not the original Hebrew), he says that the “remnant of mankind” in the last days (now!) will include “all the Gentiles who are called by my name” (v. 17). Their conversion, it is clear from Amos, is an unmistakable sign that God has ushered in the last days. Even James, whose later epistle would speak reverently of the “royal law” (James 2:8), refuses to side with the circumcision party. The final obstacles to Gentile inclusion were swept away, and Paul’s mission to them could proceed unhindered.

James’ judgment (“we should not trouble” the Gentile believers — v. 19) settled the “theological” issue. Circumcision and observance of Mosaic ceremonial law was not necessary for salvation. But there was a “sociological” dimension to

address as well. How shall we take into account the scruples of the Jews for the sake of harmony in the church, a matter Paul would later address in Romans 14? So it is that James’ judgment includes his well-known proposal that a letter be sent out to the Gentile believers urging four “abstentions” designed to insure the continued unity of the church (v. 20). They should abstain

1. “From the things polluted by idols” — i.e. from participation in sacrificial meals at pagan temples. Idolatry was “the great sin” for Jews. Just a few years later, Paul would deal with this issue that arose at Corinth (1 Cor. 8:1).
2. “From sexual immorality” (Greek *porneias*) — probably including marriages in prohibited degrees of relationship (Lev. 18:6–18) and mixed marriages with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14), as well as the usual kinds of promiscuity. Sexual looseness was a notorious feature of Gentile life.
3. “From what has been strangled” — the meat of animals killed by strangulation, with the result that the blood was not drained, as Jewish “kosher” law required (Lev. 17:10–16). This would have been an enormous stumbling block to Jews and Gentiles eating together.
4. “From blood” — not only was the blood of animals to be drained (as above), but it was not to be consumed, as was the practice in some “mystery cults.”

The rationale for this directive is stated in v. 21: “Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” Since Jewish communities are to be found in every city, their scruples are to be respected by Gentile believers.

All of the prohibitions touched on relational issues in the home or at the table. Three (1, 3, and 4) were specifically dietary. Paul Maier points out that in rabbinic tradition, the three sons of Noah, who were thought to be progenitors of both Jews and Gentiles, had the same restrictions placed on them! Jewish believers would feel that this list respected their scruples. Gentiles would rejoice that most of the burden of the Jewish law had been lifted. All could give thanks that in James’ judgment the holiness of the church (its respect for God, its submission to the Scriptures, and its opposition to idolatry and immorality) as well as the unity of Jews and Gentiles had been preserved.

LETTER FROM THE COUNCIL

ACTS 15:22-35

The “whole church” (v. 22) decided to send a delegation to deliver the letter. Two of their own “leading” men, Judas Barsabbas (who may be the brother of Joseph Barsabbas mentioned in 1:23) and Silas, also known as Silvanus, who later became a missionary partner to Paul (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:19) and Peter (1 Peter 5:12), were to accompany Paul and Barnabas. These two, later identified as “prophets” (15:32), would serve as guarantors of the reality and validity of the council’s decision.

The letter itself, which church father Clement of Alexandria called “the Catholic epistle of all the Apostles,” begins notably. “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles” (v. 23) is the lovely way in which

the leaders of the church humbled themselves, calling themselves the same word (“brothers”) as the new believers they address. The letter rebukes the Judaizers for going beyond their authority (“we gave them no instructions” — v. 24). The decision is bipartisan and unanimous (“having come to one accord’ — v. 25). Paul and Barnabas are “beloved,” have “risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 25–26), and are therefore in good standing with the mother church in Jerusalem. The “four abstentions” are enumerated in slightly different order, simplified and without explanation (Judas and Silas would provide this).

The council delegates delivered the letter to the congregation in Antioch, who “rejoiced because of its encouragement” (v. 31). After offering further words to strengthen the new believers, Judas and Silas returned to Jerusalem, while Paul and Barnabas stayed and continued teaching with “many others” (v. 35). Would to God that all the church’s controversies might end so positively!

Paul Maier reflects on what the modern church could learn from the early church in how to solve its problems. “The decision at the Jerusalem Council involved:

- a) Face-to-Face Confrontation... no indirect attacks...
- b) Listening: ... Honest effort was made by each side to hear the other...
- c) A Scriptural Solution: James based his decision on three prophets...
- d) Compromise: ... for the sake of harmony in the church.

Feuders-in-the-faith today might well look back to Christian origins for Christian solutions” (*First Christians*, pp. 79–80).

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 15:36–16:40

Lord God, as I begin study today, open the ears of my heart so that I hear You clearly. Make me sensitive to the promptings of Your Holy Spirit, willing to have my schedule interrupted and plans changed. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Review

1. At the Jerusalem Council, how was the Old Testament employed by the “circumcision party”? By James?

2. List the four “abstentions” the council required of the Gentiles and explain each.

Acts 15:36–41

3. Whose idea was the second missionary journey? What was the goal?

4. Describe the conflict that finally split Paul and Barnabas. What was the position of each man? With whom would you have sided? Why?

Acts 16:1–15

5. What do you learn about Timothy in these verses?

6. Part of this journey includes the deliverance of the council’s decision (see 15:19–21). Given that decision, why did Paul circumcise Timothy? How does 1 Cor. 9:19–23 help explain Paul’s course of action?

7. When have you (or someone you’ve known) given up your “rights” in order to better represent Christ to others? How could you do so now?

8. Using a map of the eastern Mediterranean (from your Bible or the internet), locate Phrygia, Galatia, “Asia” (the Roman province), Mysia, Bithynia, Troas, and Macedonia. Which of these is farthest from Jerusalem?

9. What’s the operative pronoun in verse 8? Verse 10? Why the change?

10. What do you learn about Lydia? Where is she from? Why do you think she’s in Philippi? Why is she a key contact for the team?

Acts 16:16–24

11. The girl has a spirit the Greeks called a “python spirit” (Python was the serpent guardian at Delphi, thought to reside in a person’s belly and speak through his/her mouth). What did this spirit enable the girl to do? Why was she important to her owners?

12. Describe what this girl did to Paul and his company. If you were Paul, how would you have felt?

a) This is good advertising! c) True, but she does more harm than good.

b) This is spooky! d) She’s driving me crazy!

13. What’s the charge against Paul and Silas (vv. 20–21)? What do you suppose is meant by “customs that are not lawful” means?

14. Describe the several punishments Paul and Silas endured.

Acts 16:25–34

15. With whom do you identify in this story — the apostles (mistreated)? The crowd (joining to accuse)? The jailer (just doing his job)? The other prisoners (watching and listening to someone react)?

16. If you are falsely accused and mistreated, how do you react?

a) I pull into a shell c) I complain to other people about what’s happened to me

b) I try to “get even” somehow d) I “praise the Lord anyway”

17. Why would the jailer consider suicide? (cf. 12:19)

18. According to v. 33, who is baptized that night? For other references to a similar occurrence, see 16:15, also 1 Cor. 1:16. Why is this a possible argument for infant baptism?

Acts 16:35–40

19. Why do you suppose Paul plays his “Roman citizen card” here?

20. Before Paul and Silas leave town, what do they take time to do?

21. Twelve years later, Paul wrote to the congregation in Philippi. Read what he writes in Phil. 4:4–7, 12–13. What do you suppose these words in his letter meant to them in light of this initial experience at Philippi?

Memory Challenge

ACTS 16:30–31 *“Then he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”*

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The Gospel Comes to Europe



CHRISTIANITY — AN EASTERN OR WESTERN RELIGION?

Is Christianity an eastern or a western religion? A recent on-line post in “Christian Forums” asked this question. The author writes that Christianity is often designated “western,” as opposed to Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, which are definitely “eastern.” Why is Christianity called “western”? Probably because it’s the predominant faith in the Western Hemisphere. Some antagonists make the “western” label a convenient excuse for denouncing it as “colonial” or even “imperialist,” since it has accompanied conquerors who were.

This categorization of Christianity as western overlooks the fact that it was birthed in the Middle East. Jesus was a Middle Eastern man who lived in North Africa for part of his childhood and the rest of his life in Palestine. Christianity was shaped initially by a Middle Eastern culture and mindset. The Christian faith was alive in the deserts of Northern Africa for centuries. The earliest known Christian monk (Anthony) and some of the most influential Christian theologians (Augustine, Origen, and Tertullian) were African. Some of the oldest Christian communities are still to be found in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and Iraq!

The truth demonstrated in the Book of Acts is that Christianity is a Middle Eastern religion that successfully moved west. The missionary journeys of Paul and his companions chronicle the “westward ho!” of the Gospel. This week’s lesson details the beginning of the second missionary journey. We see how the message of Jesus reached Europe and won its first convert there, a woman named Lydia. While the spotlight is trained on Paul’s mission journeys, lesser-known missionaries were taking the Gospel south and east as far as Sudan and India! Aren’t you glad?

PAUL AND BARNABAS PART COMPANY

ACTS 15:36–41

“Some time later” (v. 36 NIV), probably within a year of the Jerusalem Council, Paul took the initiative for a second journey, concerned to strengthen the churches planted on the first one. In the meantime, Barnabas had apparently called his cousin John Mark back to Antioch, and he proposed taking him along again. But Paul balked at the idea. In his view, John Mark was unreliable, having “withdrawn” (deserted) on the first go-round. A “sharp disagreement” (v. 39) ensued, and Luke does not gloss over it, a testimony to the transparent honesty of his narrative. Their differences were so pronounced that Barnabas and Paul would never work together again, although Paul makes respectful reference to Barnabas afterward in 1 Cor. 9:6. Mark also came back into the good graces of Paul, who wrote to Timothy that Mark was “very useful to me” (2 Tim. 4:11). Ten years later, Mark was in Rome with Paul when he wrote the church in Colossae (Col. 4:10) and to Philemon (Philemon 24).

In place of the old team, two new ones formed. Barnabas and Mark headed off once more to Cyprus. Paul chose Silas, the former envoy of the Jerusalem Council, as his new partner, and they went “through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches” (v. 41). Silas, or “Silvanus” (his Latinized name), would prove a wise choice, since he was also a Roman citizen, was fluent in Greek, and served as a helpful amanuensis (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1). Though Paul may have planned simply to re-visit the congregations planted on the first journey and then move westward into the Roman province of Asia (now western Turkey), it would soon become apparent that God had much more in mind!

TIMOTHY JOINS THE TEAM

ACTS 16:1–5

The year was AD 50. Paul and Silas set out, crossing into Asia Minor through the Cilician Gates, a narrow defile through the Taurus Mountains that Paul Maier calls “the aorta of the ancient world through which pulsed the conquerors... Xerxes, Cyrus, Xenophon, and Alexander the Great.” Their priority just now was to strengthen existing churches, so they headed down the Via Sebaste to Derbe and Lystra.

Almost at once the team met a promising young disciple named Timothy, who would figure very large on this journey and in Paul’s life. Timothy was “the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek” (v. 1). Paul’s acceptance of him was striking, for he was the child of a “mixed” marriage, something strict Jews would never accept. Further, they regarded the children of such a union as dead! Paul, however, took to heart the high praise of Timothy by “the brothers at Lystra and Iconium” (v. 2) and proposed to take him along on the journey. Before doing so, he “took him and circumcised him” (v. 3). It was a tactical decision (see 1 Cor. 9:19–23), for the local Jews knew him as the son of a Greek, and only if he were circumcised would he have ready access to synagogues as a co-worker with Paul. Scholars guess, because of the tense of the verb in v. 3, that Timothy’s father was dead by now. If so, that helps explain why Timothy so readily joined Paul on the journey and why Paul lovingly referred to him as his “beloved and faithful child” (1 Cor. 4:17).

The newly-expanded team made their way “through the cities” (v. 4) of the region. As they went, they delivered the letter from the Jerusalem Council with its four required

Paul was probably planning to follow the excellent Roman road westward to the important coastal city and provincial capital Ephesus. But God said, “No!” The company was somehow “forbidden by the Holy Spirit” from entering the province of Asia.

“abstentions” (see 15:19–21). This time no opposition surfaced, and the churches “were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily” (v. 5), one of many such progress reports Luke provides us (6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20).

“COME OVER TO MACEDONIA!”

ACTS 16:6–10

Having revisited the churches at Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch, Paul was probably planning to follow the excellent Roman road westward to the important coastal city and provincial capital Ephesus. But God said, “No!” The company was somehow “forbidden by the Holy Spirit” from entering the province of Asia (v. 6), and so headed northward through “Phrygia and Galatia.” Was Silas, who is earlier identified as a “prophet” (15:32), the Spirit’s mouthpiece?

This section makes clear the strong guiding hand of God on this mission. The “Holy Spirit” forbids them (v. 6), the “Spirit of Jesus” did not allow them (v. 7), and finally they concluded that “God had called us” (v. 10) in a new direction. The means by which God did that was a memorable nighttime vision Paul received. “A man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us!’” (v. 9).

Who was the “man of Macedonia”? Luke sometimes speaks of “men” when he means “angels” (see 1:10, 10:30). Was it an angel, the “guardian prince” of Macedonia (cf. Dan. 10:13 and 12:1), who appeared to Paul? One commentator suggested that the man in the dream was Alexander the Great, for Troas (very near the site of ancient Troy) was formally known as “Alexandrian Troas” and Philippi was named after Alexander’s father, Philip of Macedon. But this seems far-fetched. Whoever this man was, clearly Paul saw it as a call from God.

Careful readers have noticed that in v. 10, the pronoun changes from third-person “they” to first-person “we.” It appears that in Troas, Doctor Luke joined the company. Could it be that Paul met him in the course of dealing with his chronic illness (2 Cor. 12:7–10; Gal. 4:13–15)? Was Luke recruited to help tend him along the way? It is well to point out that the “we” is not constant. Luke’s narrative reverts to the third person “they” from 16:18 to 20:4, from 20:16–38 (Miletus), and from 21:19–26:32 (Jerusalem and Caesarea). We note that this “we” section stops at Philippi, and takes up again when the missionaries revisit Philippi on the third journey. These facts, along with the extensive attention given the events in Philippi, make many suppose that Luke was a resident of Philippi or else chose to remain there for an extended period. Luke’s joining of the company led to his acquaintance with Paul and his eventual writing of Luke and Acts, a crucial part of the New Testament.

THE CONVERSION OF LYDIA

ACTS 16:11–15

Paul and his companions boarded a ship at Troas and completed the 156-mile voyage to Neapolis in two days, with a stopover at Samothrace, also called Poseidon's Island. After landing, Paul pressed on 10 more miles along the Via Egnatia directly to Philippi. Philippi was becoming an important city by the time Paul and company arrived. It was a Roman colony, settled by army veterans after Antony and Octavian had defeated Brutus and Cassius in 42 BC on the plain west of town. It boasted gold mines and even a school of medicine. But Paul's focus was on proclaiming the Gospel. Where to do that?

Since there was apparently no synagogue (Jewish law required at least ten adult men who could regularly attend), Paul and companions went to a "place of prayer" (v. 13) by the Gangites River, about a mile and a half out of town. There were no men present, so the company struck up conversation with the women who were gathered for the Scripture readings, blessings, and prayers. Thus it happened that the first convert in Europe was a woman, a development that Luke was doubtless delighted to report. Luke and Acts make frequent reference to the Gospel's outreach to Gentiles (especially Roman centurions), women, and those regarded as public sinners (such as Zacchaeus).

Her name was Lydia, a businesswoman originally from Thyatira (see Rev. 2:18–29) in the ancient kingdom of Lydia, which name she bore. She was a seller of the famed Thyatiran purple goods. A Gentile who had been a worshiper of Israel's God, she was ready and willing to accept Jesus. It is possible, even probable, that she was

widowed or else unmarried, for immediately upon her baptism, she urged the missionary team to use her home as a headquarters while they were there (v. 15), an important step in establishing their presence. The references elsewhere in the New Testament to "hospitality" (Rom. 12:13 and 1 Peter 4:9, for example) underline the importance of having host homes for missionaries and meeting places for congregations (Rom. 16:5; Philemon 2; Col. 4:15; 1 Cor. 16:19). Establishing "host homes" and "house churches" is to this day a mission strategy in countries where there are no established church buildings.

PYTHON GIRL

ACTS 16:16–24

One day on their way to the place of prayer, the mission team had an encounter most strange. "We were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination...she followed Paul and us, crying out, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation'" (vv. 16–17). Such encounters had happened to Jesus several times (Luke 4:34, 41; 8:28). This slave girl had what the Greeks called a "python spirit." Python was the mythical serpent guardian at Delphi and a symbol of the god Apollo. Apollo was thought to take up residence in a person's belly and speak through his or her mouth (the root meaning of "ventriloquism"). Her ability to tell fortunes made her owners a lot of money, but what began as free publicity grew daily more irksome to Paul, who did not relish that kind of advertising! The demon's words were getting more attention than the proclamation of the Gospel (Longenecker). Finally Paul commanded the evil spirit "in the name of Jesus Christ" to come out, which it did "that very hour" (v. 18). Commentators guess that this girl, now powerfully delivered, became a Christian.

It was a relief for the mission team, but a financial disaster for the girl's owners, who "seized Paul and Silas and dragged them... before the rulers" (v. 19). Their charge was that Paul and Silas were advocating "unlawful" customs (in Latin a *religio illicita*), thus disturbing the Roman peace. The appeal that "these men are Jews" explains why Timothy and Luke escaped the charges. Taken together with the reminder that all of this offends "us... Romans" is what we'd call "playing the race card." It worked. Urged on by a hostile crowd, the magistrates "tore the garments off them" and inflicted a dreadful beating "with rods" (v. 22) of the sort carried by Roman lictors as a symbol of their authority. Already bruised and bloodied, Paul and Silas were finally thrown into the "inner prison" where their feet were "fastened... in the stocks" (v. 24). How would you have reacted in their place?

JAILHOUSE ROCK!

ACTS 16:25–34

The very next sentence brings a surprise. "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns" (v. 25)! Their response is an eloquent rebuke to us pampered moderns who so easily complain about drafty churches and the mild ostracisms of those to whom we attempt a witness. Paul and Silas prayed and sang, even though beaten, jailed, and immobilized. They praised God, even with lacerations that had now scabbed over. With the other prisoners, we listen to them, humbled and astonished.

Twice before the apostles had been jailed and faced an uncertain future (5:17 and 12:3–5). Twice before there had come a divine deliverance, administered by angels, unseen by the guards. On this night, however, no one would miss the rescue God provided, a "jailhouse rock"

that registered on the Richter scale! "Suddenly there was a great earthquake" that shook the foundations, opened the doors, and unfastened every chain (v. 26). When the now wide-awake jailer saw the doors opened, he surmised the worst and "drew his sword" to kill himself. He would, under Roman law, be subject to the same penalty of any prisoner he allowed to escape (see 12:19). Further, if he were executed, his widow would get nothing, whereas if he committed suicide, she could at least inherit his estate without penalty.

But no one had budged! "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here," shouted Paul in the darkness (v. 28). God's servants were vindicated, and the jailer was deeply moved. "Trembling with fear" he prostrated himself before these men he now saw clearly were messengers of God and asked, "Sirs [the Greek word is literally "Lords"], what must I do to be saved?" (v. 30). The answer he gets is the same Gospel message of Jesus the Savior that has punctuated Acts clear through. Since he did not know it, they proceeded to conduct a "late night catechism" class for him and "all who were in his house" (v. 32). The Gospel dynamite made a change in him and his family as dramatic as the earlier earthquake. He "washed their wounds" and "he was baptized at once, he and all his family" (vv. 33–34). It is not the first nor the last time that a "household" is baptized together (see 16:15 also 1 Cor. 1:16), just one of several cogent arguments that can be made for the baptism of infants, since at least some "households" will include small children. Once again, Luke reports, there comes a "rejoicing" unforeseen just hours earlier (see 8:39). The man at the brink of suicide crosses to safety in Christ. His rescuers are returned to their cells to await what the morning would bring. The last scene of an incredible drama is about to unfold.

Twelve years later, Paul wrote to the congregation in Philippi, a church that had become, of all his mission starts, the closest and most supportive of his work. His letter, written from another prison cell, is a testimony to the blessed “ties that bind” people and their pastors, and indeed the whole Christian family, in the deep love of Jesus and unquenchable joy the Spirit gives.



PAUL PLAYS HIS CITIZEN CARD

ACTS 16:35–40

“When it was day” the magistrates, satisfied that Paul and Silas have “learned their lesson,” order them released, and the lictors relay the message: “Come out now and go in peace” (v. 36). The magistrates are unaware that they themselves are about to be schooled! Paul tells the messengers, “They have beaten us... Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out” (v. 37). This revelation is a shock to the authorities, for beating and imprisoning Roman citizens without trial was a serious offense! The shame-faced magistrates came immediately to apologize and provide them an escort out of jail and out of town.

But Paul and Silas would not be hurried. Before leaving, they went once more to Lydia’s home and visited her and all the “brothers” in the newly-forming congregation for much-needed encouragement (v. 40). What had been so dramatically planted here would take root and grow strong.

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PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 17:1–34

Lord God, in my study of Your Word, I want to be like the Bereans! Make me diligent and attentive to the words of Scripture and their meanings, and obedient to the message You give me. I ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Review

1. Share two discoveries you made in the previous lesson. Anything you'd like to learn more about?

2. What do you think Silas, Timothy, and Luke added to the missionary team? Can you think of anything they supplied that Paul lacked?

3. What crucial role did Lydia play as the first convert in Philippi?

Acts 17:1–9

4. Find out what you can about Thessalonica from your Bible's footnotes or other resources, including the internet.

5. After reading this section, read Paul's reflections on their welcome to Thessalonica and the mission's accomplishments in 1 Thessalonians 1:4–2:2. What enables him to say the mission was "not in vain"?

6. How would you summarize Paul's teaching about Jesus in the synagogue at Thessalonica? Compare what Paul says here with what Peter said in 2:29–36 and 10:38–43, and with what Paul said earlier in 13:23–39.

7. What is the accusation here against the missionaries? Compare it with Luke 23:2 and Acts 16:20–21.

8. Whether Jesus or Caesar was "king" or "lord" became a real issue in the early Christians' daily life (v. 7). How has your faith led you into conflict with other "authorities" who claim your loyalty?

Acts 17:10–15

9. Describe the Bereans' use of the Bible. In terms of time spent, consistency, and intensity, how would you rate your own Bible study habits?

10. Why did the "brothers" split up the mission team (vv. 14–15)? Consult a map to determine the distance from Thessalonica to Athens.

Acts 17:16–21

11. What distresses you spiritually about the area where you live?
- _____
12. What two places does Paul select to engage in his mission work (v. 17)? What does their selection tell you about his methodology?
- _____
13. In what settings would you be “at home” sharing your faith:
- | | |
|--|----------------------------|
| _____ With close friends or relatives | _____ With neighbors |
| _____ In an internet “chat room” | _____ At work |
| _____ In a university classroom or dining area | _____ In a foreign country |
| _____ On city street-corners | |
14. Record what you discover in your Bible’s footnotes or online about
- Epicureans – _____
- Stoics – _____
- The Areopagus – _____

Acts 17:22–34

15. This section contains Paul’s famous sermon on Mars Hill. How is this sermon different from his address to the Jews in 13:16–41?
- _____
16. How does he change tactics to suit this new audience? What “contact point” do you think Paul would use to engage unbelievers in our culture?
- _____
17. What does Paul emphasize about God?
- _____
18. Paul quotes pagan writers (cf. 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12) but no Scriptures. Why? Could you share the Gospel without quoting the Bible?
- _____
19. “Resurrection” is a key idea in his message (v. 32). Greeks accepted the soul’s immortality, but not a bodily resurrection. What’s the difference between these ideas?
- _____
20. What was the result of this sermon?
- _____

Memory Challenge

ACTS 17:22–23 “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

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JOURNEY TWO:

Thessalonica, Berea, Athens



CHRISTIANITY ENCOUNTERS THE COMPETITION

A generation or two ago, the United States felt like a “Christian nation.” The majority of the population professed the Christian faith, and the church and its clergy had the respect of the community. With the exception of Judaism, other world religions had only a minimal presence in the culture, and one could spend a whole life without any substantive encounter with their adherents. It felt comfortable, to be sure, but was it really a good thing? Did we appreciate the contrast between the Gospel and alternative world views?

In any case, those days are long gone! The globalizing of the world and a rising tide of immigration have insured that almost all of us now routinely encounter individuals of differing ethnicities and religious persuasions, whether next door or on the internet. There are Muslims, Buddhists, cultists, atheists and agnostics galore. Philosophies clash in internet chat rooms. On many college campuses diversity is extolled and Christian faith is routinely marginalized or even ridiculed. Atheists demand and get equal space on billboards and public displays. School boards debate whether to have “Christmas programs” on school calendars, and increasingly the answer is “no.” For some of us, it feels like a frightening problem, but the Book of Acts reminds us that our changing culture brings healthy opportunities.

The first generation Christians were not given a “pass” by their culture. They were forced to understand their neighbors’ faiths and philosophies and be prepared to make an informed witness. Within a single chapter (Acts 17) Paul and his companions met, in turn, a hostile mob, a dedicated group of Jewish Bible students, and a set of curious but skeptical Greek philosophers. Such varied groups required both mental flexibility and courage in response. The missionaries had to meet objections, endure hostility, and “walk the talk.” It was no small challenge.

It still isn’t! The church in America is getting a taste of what those early Christians met as they scattered across the world with the message of Jesus. For them, the encounters routinely resulted in joy, even in the face of opposition. For us the growing diversity of our culture presents unforeseen opportunities to show hospitality and the love of Christ to people who have never experienced it. The mission door has opened wide to us! Ponder the story of the missionary team’s work in Acts 17. Let it inform our witness and inspire our faith as we face a world that still needs the message we bring.

A MOB IN THESSALONICA

ACTS 17:1-9

The missionaries had crossed into Europe, encountering both enthusiastic reception and strong opposition in Philippi. They now made their way west from Philippi through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica, a journey of 100 miles that would have taken three days. Luke dispenses with it in a single sentence!

Thessalonica was the largest, most prosperous city in Macedonia. It had already been a Roman colony for two centuries. Flamboyant oriental religions and the emperor cult flourished there. Its population of 200,000 included a sizable contingent of Jews. Its special importance to Paul and company was its strategic location on the Via Egnatia, a major

thoroughfare, from which Christianity could spread more rapidly both east and west.

Once more Paul began his work in the synagogue, where he met with the congregation over three consecutive Sabbaths. After preaching, he stayed to dialogue, reasoning with them “from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead” and proclaiming Jesus of Nazareth as that Messiah (vv. 2–3). As with the earlier sermons of Peter (2:29–36 and 10:38–43) and his own on the first journey (13:23–39), the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus and His messiahship were at the heart of things.

From a letter to the congregation in Thessalonica written later on the journey, we learn that Paul stayed long enough that he had to work to support himself and long enough to follow up evangelistic outreach with ongoing pastoral care (1 Thess. 2:8–11). Paul recounted appreciatively how the Thessalonians had welcomed the message with “the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6), and that they “became an example” to other believers in Macedonia (v. 7). They took so seriously the imminence of Christ’s return that Paul had to write a second letter to correct their impression that the end of history would come immediately!

As always, there came a two-fold reaction. Some Jews accepted the message. An even greater number of the “god-fearing” Greeks at the synagogue and “not a few prominent women” (v. 4 NIV) did too. But the Jews who did not accept his message “were jealous” (cf. 13:45; Matt. 27:18) and “formed a mob” (v. 5). They proceeded to the house of Jason (presumably the host for the mission team, as Lydia had been in Philippi) to lay hands on the missionaries.

Jason, it appears, knew what was happening and hid the mission team just in time! The frustrated mob dragged him “and some of the brothers”

before the “authorities” (Greek *politarchas*, the local, non-Roman city magistrates). This word, by the way, has been found on 16 inscriptions in the ancient towns of Macedonia. The charge leveled at the missionaries was sedition, the promotion of Jesus as a “rival king” to Caesar — serious if true! The same charge was brought against Jesus (Luke 23:2 and John 19:12). Such mob violence was becoming so common that the Jews in Rome were expelled by Emperor Claudius in AD 49–50 because of “constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus” (Christ) according to Roman historian Suetonius. The authorities in Thessalonica found all this troubling enough that even though the missionaries themselves could not be produced, they made Jason “post bond” as assurance that things would not get out of control again (v. 9).

As usual, however, trouble followed close on Paul and Silas’s heels. The unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica got wind of where the missionaries had traveled and followed them to Berea, where they managed once more to “agitate” the crowds against them.

• • •

BIBLE STUDENTS IN BEREIA

ACTS 17:10-15

That night the new believers, aware of the dangerous climate in Thessalonica, “sent Paul and Silas away...to Berea” (v. 10), fifty miles southwest, a much smaller town that was off the beaten track. Undaunted by their string of close calls, Paul and Silas made their way at once to the local synagogue and began once more to proclaim Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

Luke gave the Jews at Berea undying fame by characterizing them as “more noble” than the Jews in Thessalonica, on two counts. First, they “received the word with all eagerness.” Second, they began “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (v. 11). It is a description that challenges us who are blessed with God’s full and final word in the New Testament to examine whether we have such zeal, such curiosity, such hunger for the truth of God that we will do as these people did who had only the Old Testament. Eagerly? Daily?

The harvest in Berea was abundant. “Many of them... believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing [Luke loves to record this!] as well as men” (v. 12). These converts, the Greek makes clear, were not simply the “god-fearers” attending the synagogue but many who had been “pagan” Gentiles with no prior connection to Israel’s

God. One of the converts, Sopater (20:4), later represented the church there as he accompanied Paul to Jerusalem after his third mission journey.

As usual, however, trouble followed close on Paul and Silas's heels. The unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica got wind of where the missionaries had traveled and followed them to Berea, where they managed once more to "agitate" the crowds against them (v. 13). There would be no delay that might risk harm. "Immediately" the brothers "sent Paul off on his way to the sea" (v. 14), accompanying him all the way to Athens, some 200 miles south where the distance and the philosophical aura of the old city would shield him.

And what of the new believers in Berea? Paul made good use of his talented team. Silas and Timothy stayed to finish laying the foundation of a viable congregation. In Paul's letter we discover that over the following months after they rejoined him (the time line is not clear), he sent Silas back to Philippi (Phil. 4:15-16) and Timothy back once again to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:1). During their absence on these intermediate assignments, Paul traveled on to Corinth, where the team was finally reunited (18:5) and where Paul wrote 1 & 2 Thessalonians, the earliest of his many canonical epistles.

PHILOSOPHERS IN ATHENS

ACTS 17:16-21

Meanwhile, Paul was left alone in Athens, waiting for his co-workers (v. 16). He had not originally planned to come here, but the need to escape further persecution in Macedonia rewrote his itinerary. Named in honor of the goddess Athena, Athens was a great and ancient city in slow decline. At its zenith 500 years earlier the Parthenon had been built. The erstwhile

home of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, it still attracted intellectuals from all over the world. By Paul's day it was outstripped by Alexandria and matched by Tarsus in culture and learning, but it was still the sentimental and symbolic capital of the Hellenistic world.

Surrounded by architectural and historical wonders though he was, Paul found Athens' culture spiritually repugnant. The first observation Luke records is that "his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (v. 16). Unable to contain himself and wait for reinforcements, he set out on a one-man crusade, selecting two arenas to make his witness. He chose to fight his good fight "in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons," (familiar ground!) and also "in the marketplace [Greek *agora*] every day with those who happened to be there" (v. 17). As the original "Jew for Jesus" (2,000 years before that group began its work in the United States!), Paul made his sortie into the ancient world's most challenging intellectual venue.

In that marketplace he came face to face with two philosophies by which the Gentile world tried to deal with human pain. "Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him" (v. 18). The Epicureans believed that the gods were remote and uncaring. Everything in life, they said, was by chance, not by design, and since death ends everything, the chief end of man was "pleasure," the greatest of which would be to live free from pain and disturbing passions. Quite a trick, if one could pull it off! The Stoics, by contrast, believed that "god's" spirit was the spark within all men. Since all was by god's will, we must accept it without resentment and live harmoniously with nature. Paul listened and shared freely. In consequence, some called him a "babler"

(Greek *spermologos*). The term denotes a bird that pecks at seeds, or a human that picks up ideas not his own and becomes a purveyor of half-digested wisdom. Others identified him as a “preacher of foreign divinities” (v. 18) since he spoke of Jesus and the resurrection. Some commentators guess that the initial impression they had was that “Jesus” and “Resurrection” (understood perhaps as his consort *anastasis*) were a pair of divine lovers, like Aphrodite and Ares (Mars).

Paul’s new dialogue partners were interested enough in his strange ideas to bring him to the Areopagus, a word that means both a place – the “Hill of Ares” (or Mars hill) — as well as the elite group of thirty men that held court there. Originally the court that presided over cases of murder and public morals, it no longer held any life-and-death authority. Still it supervised the erection of public buildings and judged matters of public piety. It could grant Paul license to keep talking publicly or shut him up. In our own day the title Areopagus is the name of the Greek supreme court. On that day curiosity overcame any hesitance: “We wish to know... what these things mean” (v. 20). Paul would have his opportunity!

DISCOURSE ON “THE UNKNOWN GOD”

ACTS 17:22-34

Paul seized this unique moment to deliver his now-famous “Sermon on Mars Hill.” He was not in a synagogue, nor addressing listeners familiar with the Old Testament. So the form and substance of this message differ dramatically from the sermons Luke has earlier recorded.

Though they were idolaters, Paul chose to begin by commending them for being “very religious.” Curiously, the Greek word literally

means “very reverent to demons”! He tied the compliment to an altar he had lately observed dedicated “To the unknown god,” in Greek *Agnoostoo Theoo* (v. 23). Early writers have confirmed the existence of several such altars in the city. It expressed, perhaps, their fear that none be offended by being left out. “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” It was a Spirit-inspired stroke of genius!

What follows touches on themes familiar to these philosophers and even quotes pagan poets (cf. 1 Cor. 15:33 and Titus 1:12) rather than the Old Testament. Despite its Greek trappings, writes C. S. C. Williams, “the remarkable thing about this famous speech is that for all its wealth of pagan illustration, its message is simply the Galilean Gospel.” Here in outline are the essential points:

- a. God is not Made but the Maker. He is not an “image formed by the art and imagination of man” (v. 29). He is the source of life (as the Stoics said) and self-sufficient (as the Epicureans said), but He is personal (contra Stoics) and “not far from each one of us” (v. 27 – contra Epicureans). To buttress his argument Paul quotes Epimenides (600 BC) from Crete and Aratus (275 BC) from Cilicia, Paul’s own neighborhood! Both poets had celebrated Zeus as “father” to men (the name Zeus means “he lives”). In other words, “You Greeks ought to realize that your own poets teach you to dispense with the crude idolatry I see in evidence here!”
- b. Further, God made man that he “should seek God” (the word “seek” means “groped” like Cyclops groped for Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey*!).

Today the Acropolis stands at the intersection of the Avenue of Dionysius the Areopagite and St. Paul's Street. Lives are still being changed when Christianity meets its competition at the intersection of God's Word and the hungry human heart.



- c. God has guided history — not a cyclic re-emergence every few thousand years, as Stoics said, but a purposeful linear movement from “ignorance” to “judgment.” The “times of ignorance” are past (all Greek culture is consigned to this!).
- d. The Day of Judgment is coming. Think of it — standing before the Athenian “court of morals,” Paul calls *them* to repent!
- e. The coming Judge is seen to be bona fide by His resurrection. To Greeks generally this was a ridiculous idea. Greeks thought the soul immortal, that it simply lived on after death. Aeschylus had written, “Once [man] is dead, there is no resurrection!” Jesus’ resurrection and His role as Judge is here stressed, rather than the crucifixion. Paul is surely hoping for more talks to follow!

What was the result of this sermon? Some mocked, especially when Paul spoke of a resurrection. Others postponed a decision: “We will hear you again about this” (v. 32). Paul evidently did not get permission to continue his public preaching, for he moved on to Corinth after a short time. When Paul later wrote of the “firstfruits” in Achaia, he referred to the “household of Stephanus” in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:16). Nevertheless God’s Word had not “returned empty” (Is. 55:11). “Some men joined him and believed” (v. 34). Always there were “some”!

Two converts are named. Dionysius the Areopagite (one of the thirty on the council) became a disciple, and later tradition says he became the bishop of Athens! Luke also mentions a woman named Damaris. One wonders how that happened, since women were not normally allowed at sessions of the Areopagus. There came unnamed “others with them.” The Gospel had been planted in Greece and began to grow.

Today the Acropolis stands at the intersection of the Avenue of Dionysius the Areopagite and St. Paul’s Street. Lives are still being changed when Christianity meets its competition at the intersection of God’s Word and the hungry human heart.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 18:1–28

Lord God, how often my fear takes over and silences me! Tell me what you told Paul: “Do not be silent for I am with you.” Thank you for this Word in Scripture and for opportunities to speak. Help me take it to heart today. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Review

1. What did you learn about the cities of Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens?

2. How did Paul get help from his other team members in Chapter 17?

3. Share a couple of ways that Paul made connections with his audience at Mars Hill.

Acts 18:1–6

4. What do you discover from your Bible’s notes or from the internet about the city of Corinth?

5. Claudius (v. 2) was emperor from AD 41–54. He expelled the Jews from Rome because of “their continual tumults instigated by Chrestus” (Christ), wrote Suetonius. How did that edict eventually affect Paul’s ministry?

6. Paul shares with Priscilla and Aquila the occupation of tentmaking. In our day “tentmaker ministry” has a special meaning. What is it?

7. Many Lutheran churches in our country are without a pastor and are not calling anyone because they cannot afford the cost. Think of several possible options by which pastoral care might be supplied.

8. How did the arrival of Silas and Timothy bring help? (See 2 Cor. 11:9)

9. What’s the meaning of Paul’s symbolic gesture in reaction to Jewish opposition here? (cf. Matt. 10:14) Did his words in v. 6 signal a change in mission strategy generally or just in Corinth? (See 18:19 and 19:8)

Acts 18:7–17

10. Read about two other occasions in which the Lord communicated with Paul by a vision (9:3–6 and 16:9). What were the messages the Lord gave him in each one? As a result of this message, how long does Paul stay in Corinth?

11. The mention of Gallio as proconsul of Achaia in v. 12 provides a peg date upon which scholars construct a chronology of Paul's ministry. What do you discover about Gallio in your Bible or on the internet (check "the Gallio Inscription")?

12. Why does Gallio refuse to hear the case against Paul (vv. 14-15)?

13. Who is Sosthenes (v. 17) and why is he beaten? Read 1 Cor. 1:1. If this is the same man, he would be the second "synagogue ruler" to convert!

Acts 18:18-22

14. "He was under a vow" (v. 18). Read Num. 6:1-21. What kind of vow is described there, and what does it involve? How does Num. 6:18 explain the cutting of the hair? Does this help explain why Paul felt he must soon return to Jerusalem?

15. Who accompanies Paul to Ephesus? What do you think has become of Silas and Timothy?

Acts 18:23-28

16. What do you learn about Apollos in this brief section that is of interest to you? What role would you urge him to play in your congregation?

17. "He knew only the baptism of John" (v. 25). Read Luke 3:3 and 7:29. How is this different from Christian baptism?

18. What's instructive about the way Priscilla and Aquila handle the doctrinal deficiencies of Apollos? Has anyone helped you in a similar way?

19. Do you see any husband/wife teams who work together spiritually like Priscilla and Aquila?

20. Apollos then travels to Corinth. What role does he play? How is he like Paul? To appreciate his impact, see 1 Cor. 1:10-12.

Memory Challenge

Review what you have learned thus far.

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Ministry Partnership in Corinth



TEAM MINISTRY

How many ministers does your congregation have? How you answer depends on what you understand by the word “minister.” If we define the word narrowly to denote the clergy, the number would be small. Many Lutheran churches have but a single pastor. Larger congregations may be able to afford the help of a “vicar” (as student interns are sometimes called), or an associate pastor or two.

If one expands the definition to include other kinds of “called” or “contracted” workers, the number is larger. Lutheran congregations these days often employ Directors of Christian Education or Outreach, Deaconesses, teachers, youth ministers, and more. We say such churches have a “multiple staff” ministry, and those involved can attest to the blessings of sharing the work among people with varied gifts.

The widest definition of “ministry” is “service.” Using this definition, one could properly say that ALL the people in a congregation serve somehow and are a part of the team ministry there, just as all the organs in a body have some useful purpose (1 Cor. 12:12–31). Happy is that congregation whose people know they have some “ministry” to perform, whether in prayer, in child care, in song, in visitation, in paying bills, or even keeping the facilities clean and the grass cut!

Ministry in the Christian church has always been a team effort, not a solo performance by a few charismatic personalities. The Book of Acts depicts the ministries of the apostles, to be sure. But we also meet the

missionary team that accompanied Paul — Barnabas, John Mark, Silas, Timothy, Luke, and others. There were “deacons,” some of whom doubled as evangelists, and “elders” too. There were scattered others without any title who went out “preaching” (Acts 8:4) in some fashion. Some like Lydia and Jason played a key role by serving as hosts, offering their homes for the mission team and congregation gatherings.

In Chapter 18 we meet still more. Enter Priscilla and Aquila, a husband and wife who made tents for a living, but who also served as encouraging partners to Paul and theological tutors for a gifted teacher named Apollos. Their story, as shared by Luke, may inspire us to find our niche and “minister” with energy and joy.

In our day, “tentmaker” still has meaning. It describes a pastor who supplies his financial needs through a secular job and not through a church salary. In some places, this becomes the only realistic option for a small congregation with minimal resources to have regular pastoral care.



THREE TENTMAKERS IN CORINTH

ACTS 18:1-8

Greece is almost cut in two by the sea. Corinth sits on a narrow neck of land less than five miles across. North and south land traffic had to pass through Corinth, often called “The Bridge of Greece.” Ship traffic between Rome and the east also came through Corinth. Few wanted to hazard the dangerous voyage around the southern tip of Greece called Cape Malea. William Barclay writes that the Greeks had a proverb: “Let him who thinks of sailing around Malea make his will!” Ships going west or east could offload their cargo, or even be transported on rollers across the isthmus. All this made Corinth “The marketplace of Greece.”

In Paul’s day, Corinth was a large city with a population of about 200,000, ten times the size of Athens! It was also a wicked city, famous for drunkenness and sexual immorality. On top of the city’s hill stood the Temple of Aphrodite at which 1,000 prostitutes were employed. In the evenings they came down the city streets to ply their trade. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul listed the varieties of evil he witnessed there: “Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom,” and then comes the telling phrase, “and such were some of you” (1 Cor. 6:9–11). Paul had a challenging mission field in Corinth, and

Luke records that he stayed for 18 months, an uncommonly long time (18:11).

A long stay required financial resources. As a rabbi, Paul had been required to practice a regular trade to support himself. He was a tentmaker (v. 3), work that he probably learned in his native Tarsus, where herds of goats were kept for their fleece, which was called *cilicium* and used widely for tent-making. In our day, “tentmaker” still has meaning. It describes a pastor who supplies his financial needs through a secular job and not through a church salary. In some places, this becomes the only realistic option for a small congregation with minimal resources to have regular pastoral care.

Paul did not work alone. Luke tells us that he partnered there with a Jewish Christian couple named Priscilla and Aquila. Aquila was a native of Pontus who, until recently, had been living in Rome (v. 2). But he and Priscilla, along with other Jews, were expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius. The emperor’s edict brought Priscilla and Aquila to Corinth and into Paul’s life. Scholars guess that Aquila was a Jewish slave who became a freedman in Rome and married a Jewess connected with a Roman family. The frequent mention of her name before his may indicate that she had the money and contacts that enabled them to own a tent-making business, possibly with branches at Rome (Rom. 16:3), Corinth, and Ephesus (see 18:19).

At first, Paul worked through the week and then spent “every Sabbath” at the synagogue where he made the case for Jesus as Messiah (vv. 4–5). The arrival of Timothy and Silas from

Macedonia with financial gifts from Philippi (2 Cor. 11:9; Phil. 4:14–15), made a switch to full-time ministry possible. The ESV rendering of v. 5 as “Paul was occupied with the word” is not as clear as the NIV version: “Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching.” In response to Timothy’s heartening news about the mission in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:6), Paul wrote them to commend their zeal and offer encouragement in their Christian walk.

His increased activity, meanwhile, was bringing a response, including some mounting opposition. As had happened at Pisidian Antioch, the initial proclamation at the synagogue produced a rejection by the majority of the Jews, followed by a direct outreach to the Gentiles. “When they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles’” (v. 6). The shaking out of dust from one’s clothes or sandals (Neh. 5:13; Matt. 10:14) was a symbolic act of rejection and exemption from further responsibility (cf. 13:51).

From this point on, Paul discontinued meeting at the synagogue, though it did not signal a change in his mission strategy generally (see 18:19 and 19:8). He made his base of operation “the house of a man named Titius Justus,” a Gentile God-fearer who happened to live next door to the synagogue (v. 7)! One of the first Jews to accept Paul’s message was Crispus, the synagogue leader who, together with his whole household, “believed in the Lord” (v. 8) and was baptized by Paul (1 Cor. 1:14). His conversion likely had quite an impact.

**“DON’T BE AFRAID;
KEEP ON SPEAKING!”**

ACTS 18:9-17

The memory of the problems in Thessalonica and his dismissal by the Areopagus in Athens, along with the opposition of the Jews who worshiped right next door must have burdened Paul’s heart. Maybe he wondered if previous experiences of a good start, followed by opposition strong enough to force him out of town, would be repeated here in Corinth. Luke tells us that that God granted him an encouraging vision one night. “Do not be afraid,” the Lord told him. “Go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people” (v. 10). It was the same strengthening presence God had once promised the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 1:8).

Twice before (9:3–6 and 16:9) the Lord had given Paul direction by a vision. It would not be the last time. Emboldened by this direct word, Paul came to his work with new determination. His stay in Corinth lasted 18 months.

God had not said there would be no opposition. Just no “harm”! The truth of the vision became evident some time later when “the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal” of the Roman proconsul Gallio. This mention of Gallio as proconsul of Achaia (v. 12) provides a peg date upon which scholars construct a chronology of Paul’s ministry. Gallio’s term as governor can be dated, due to the archeologists’ discovery of four stone fragments at Delphi, 50 miles northwest of Corinth. According to historian Paul Maier, the fragments can be dated to AD 51–52.

On them are the words: “[Concerning] the present stories, and those quarrels of the citizens of which [a report has been made by Lucius] Junius Gallio, my friend, and [pro] consul of Achaia...” This inscription has become an anchor for Pauline chronology because proconsuls held office, generally, for only one year.

The Jews made their accusation: “This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law” (v. 13). They were claiming that the religion he advocated was not recognized by Roman law as Judaism was. But Gallio refused to be drawn into what he considered an intramural squabble, explaining that “it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law” (v. 15). With those words he dismissed the case and forcibly drove the accusers from the tribunal. Gallio’s decision was important, says Longenecker, for it was tantamount to recognizing Christianity as a *religio licita* (approved religion). For the next decade or so, Christianity could be proclaimed without fear from the Romans, at least.

The gathered crowd reacted by seizing Sosthenes, another synagogue “ruler” (like Crispus), and beating him “in front of the tribunal” (v. 17). Were they Gentiles attacking a Jew in an anti-Semitic fit, or were they Jews angered by Sosthenes because they thought him too friendly toward Paul? Some scholars think it was the latter, that Sosthenes had come to defend Paul and later, like Crispus, became a Christian himself. They say that he is the same man mentioned in 1 Cor. 1:1. If that is true, he would be the second synagogue ruler to convert!

JOURNEY HOME TO ANTIOCH

ACTS 18:18–22

The ministry at Corinth proceeded with considerable success for months after Gallio’s decision. In the spring of AD 52, however, Paul left Corinth to return to Antioch, with a prior stop at Jerusalem. At least a part of the reason was that “he was under a vow” (v. 18). What sort of vow was this? The mention by Luke that Paul “cut his hair” at Cenchreae seems to indicate that it was a form of the Nazirite vow (see Numbers 6), possibly undertaken early in his time at Corinth when he was still anxious about his future. The vow required that the hair be allowed to grow and that no strong drink be consumed. Now, having seen God’s hand protecting him and blessing the work, he was determined to fulfill his vow by presenting his hair as a burnt offering with accompanying sacrifice at the temple (Num. 6:18–20) after a 30-day period of purification.

Paul was accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila, who may have been on their way to Ephesus to transfer their tent-making business or open a new branch there. Silas and Timothy are not mentioned. It is possible that they stayed on for a time in Corinth, or else that Luke simply did not mention their presence on the voyage.

For a brief time Paul took the opportunity and “reasoned with the Jews” in the synagogue at Ephesus (v. 19) as he had hoped to do two years earlier at the start of this journey. Priscilla and Aquila set up shop in Ephesus and asked Paul to stay on with them there (v. 20), but he declined in order to fulfill the vow.

The final leg of his voyage took him to Caesarea, the port city for Jerusalem. From Caesarea he “went up” to the holy city (travel to Jerusalem from any direction was “up”) 65 miles to the southeast. There he greeted the mother church, fulfilled his vow, and then “went down” (travel away from Jerusalem in any direction was “down”) to Antioch, three hundred miles to the north, ministering within the church that had originally commissioned him to reach out to the Gentiles. He remained in Antioch for “some time,” probably until the following spring (of AD 53), when he set out once more to strengthen the churches “through the region of Galatia and Phrygia” (v.23, cf.16:6) founded on his earlier journeys. Thus, in a very low-key fashion, Luke announces the beginning of what we call the Third Missionary Journey.

APOLLOS THE BOLD

ACTS 18:23–28

Sometime after Paul departed Ephesus, a man destined to be a “rising star” in the church appeared in the city. He was a Jew from Alexandria, described here as an “eloquent man” (v. 24). The Greek word can also mean “educated” (contrast him with Peter and John, described in 4:13 as “uneducated”), which is not surprising since Alexandria, with its great library, was the literary capital of the Hellenistic world. His religious genealogy is obscure. Someone somewhere had instructed him “in the way of the Lord” (v. 25). It may have been some disciples of John the Baptist who taught him about Jesus since Luke observes that Apollos “knew only the baptism of John.” John’s baptism (Luke 7:29), which indicated one’s repentance and God’s washing of forgiveness (Luke 3:3), was a precursor to Christian

Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos worked with Paul in a way that still models “team ministry” to the church in our time.



baptism, though it did not impart the Holy Spirit (see 19:2). But what he knew of Jesus, even though incomplete, he taught “accurately” and with admirable boldness (v. 26).

God’s providence arranged for Priscilla and Aquila to hear Apollos one day at the synagogue. While it was obvious to them that his knowledge of the Christian way was not fully formed, they did not treat him as a false teacher. Instead “they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (v. 26), becoming thereby a model of how to deal with doctrinal differences. Their patient instruction had good effect, for when Apollos “wished to cross to Achaia” (v. 27) the believers not only encouraged him but even wrote a letter of introduction urging the believers in Corinth “to welcome him.”

So it happened that Apollos made a fine beginning of his work in Corinth and “greatly helped” the believers there. A bold witness like Paul, he “powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus” (v. 28). His popularity in Corinth is reflected in the fact that a party arose claiming him as its leader (1 Cor. 1:12). Paul would later acknowledge that what he had planted, Apollos had watered (1 Cor. 3:6). Apollos later accompanied Paul for a time in Crete (Titus 3:13). It may even be, as Luther first suggested, that Apollos authored Hebrews, a brilliantly constructed argument for Jesus as Messiah, which employed Old Testament history and imagery (says Robert Smith).

Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos worked with Paul in a way that still models “team ministry” to the church in our time.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 19:1-41

Lord God, as I open Your Word today, grant me Your Holy Spirit and nourish what You have begun in me. Help me to live a life that matches the message I believe and speak, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Review

1. Have you been taking up the “memory challenge”? If so, review with those in your small group what you remember and what benefit it's given you.

-
2. What was Paul's secular job? How do you think it proved useful on his mission journey?

-
3. How did the archeological discovery of the “Gallio Inscription” assist scholars seeking to understand the New Testament?

Acts 19:1-12

4. Paul now comes for a lengthy stay in Ephesus (more than 2 years). He had been there only briefly on his 2nd journey (18:20). What can you discover from Bible footnotes or the internet about Ephesus? Any information about the size of the Temple of Diana?

-
5. What doctrinal deficiency does Paul discover at Ephesus? What does Paul's question in verse 3 reveal about his baptismal theology?

-
6. In your small group, review what happened in Acts 2:4; 8:14-17; 10:44-46 and now here in verse 6. How are these connected? What stands out?

Acts 19:13-20

7. Who are the sons of Sceva, and what are they doing? What's wrong with their approach?

-
8. How do you think people try to use Jesus for their own purposes today?

-
9. In verse 19, some people burn their scrolls. What do you need to “burn” in order to live more devotedly to God? What will it cost you?

Acts 19:21-41

10. What small note in v. 21 points to the greater geographic narrative at work in this book (see 1:8)?

11. The temple of Artemis (Diana) was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Tourists flocked to the site. What role did the silversmiths have there?

12. What is Demetrius' summary of Paul's message (v. 26)? Why did he and the others fear Paul?

13. Read Isaiah 44:9-20 to hear God's take on idols and their creators. What would you say are some common "idols" in our time?

14. Are there instances when becoming a committed Christian could be "bad for business" today?

15. Why does the crowd react when they "recognized that (Alexander) was a Jew" (v. 34)?

16. How do the concerns of Demetrius and the city clerk (vv. 35-41) compare?

17. In reading the account of the missionary journeys thus far, what would you say that the church today could learn from the missionaries and their experiences?

Memory Challenge

Review what you have learned thus far.

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A Long Stay in Ephesus



STAYING PUT

How long should a pastor stay at a congregation? Some stay only a few years, while others spend a lifetime in one spot. This writer served a church in Ohio whose original pastor came in 1904 and stayed until his death 63 years later! On the other hand, I served a congregation in Illinois which had more than 35 pastors, interns and vacancy helpers in its 63-year history! The average length stay of a pastor in the LCMS is between 6-8 years. Many, including writer Eugene Peterson, counsel pastors to stay put, alleging that longer pastorates are generally more helpful to congregations than shorter ones. Would you agree?

The apostle Paul was not a resident pastor, of course, but a missionary and evangelist who planted churches and then appointed elders to supply ongoing pastoral care to the people after he departed. His stays were often measured in months or weeks rather than years. It was highly unusual for him to stay anywhere very long. Two exceptions to his normal practice were the 18 months he spent in Corinth and the three years he labored at Ephesus. The result of his work in Ephesus was that “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). The province of “Asia” included the congregations mentioned in Revelation 2-3, along with Colossae and Hierapolis. Some of this mission outreach may have been done by enthusiastic disciples of Paul who undertook to share the message in outlying towns. Paul “stayed put” for three years, and the result was an abundant harvest.

This lesson will take a closer look at that long stay in Ephesus and some of the strange, wonderful things that happened there. We must point out that Luke is highly selective in telling the story of that ministry. The three years get but a single chapter, partly because Luke was not present with Paul during that time (there are no “we” pronouns in the chapter) and perhaps also because Luke wants to emphasize the progress that will finally bring the Gospel to Rome. He focuses on the triumphs and says less about the hardships. Paul’s letters to Corinth, almost certainly written from Ephesus, reveal to us a larger, more complex story with some dreadful struggles. Acts 19 says nothing of how Paul “fought with beasts at Ephesus” (1 Cor. 15:32) or of “the affliction we experienced in Asia” so that he “despaired of life itself” (2 Cor. 1:8). These letters make clear that Paul experienced “the good, the bad, and the ugly” as he worked in Ephesus. Most pastors nowadays do too, especially those who choose to stay put.

The Third Missionary Journey, begun without fanfare in the spring of AD 52, saw Paul retrace earlier travels through Galatia and Phrygia (cf. 16:6), “strengthening all the disciples.”



ENCOUNTER WITH JOHN’S DISCIPLES

A LONG STAY IN EPHEBUS

The Third Missionary Journey, begun without fanfare in the spring of AD 52, saw Paul retrace earlier travels through Galatia and Phrygia (cf. 16:6), “strengthening all the disciples” (18:23). Directed away from Ephesus on his previous trip, Paul had made a momentous detour to Troas and across to Macedonia and Greece before making the briefest of visits to Ephesus (18:20). Apollos, on the other hand, had a lengthier stay there. His ministry was powerful, but his theology was deficient to such a degree that Priscilla and Aquila had set about correcting him (18:26). Apollos finally made his way across to Corinth where he had an effective ministry.

Now Paul finally came to Ephesus for a lengthier stay (v. 1). The city of Ephesus, located near the coast on the Little Meander River, was the greatest trading center of Asia Minor, the “Treasure House of Asia.” But it also held “the wildest collection of pagan priests, exorcists, magicians... and charlatans in the Roman empire” (Paul Maier). It was famous for charms and spells written on so-called “Ephesian Letters,” which guaranteed safety in travel, success in love, and children for childless couples. People from all over the Mediterranean world came to buy those letters and even wear them as amulets for good luck.

The result of his work in Ephesus was that “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”

ACTS 19:10



The very first event Luke mentions in Ephesus is that Paul met some “disciples” (v. 1), a word that everywhere else in Acts (28 times!) indicated “Christians.” If these men were Christians, however, they were “incomplete” Christians, says William Barclay. Possibly because they were new on Paul’s radar, he asked, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” (v. 2). His question reveals how crucial the reception of the Holy Spirit was seen to be in the proclamation of the Gospel (it is something mentioned at each of the “Pentecostal spreadings” to new people groups – 2:4, 8:14–17, 10:44–46). Their answer was stunning: “We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit!” It must have made him wonder if they were truly Christian at all, so he asked a follow-up question: “Into what then were you baptized?” The answer? “Into John’s baptism” (v. 3).

Had these men been taught by Apollos who, prior to the mentoring of Priscilla and Aquila, “knew only the baptism of John” (18:25)? Were they perhaps members of a “John the Baptist” sect that had existed independently? Once again, as had happened with Apollos, there came a clear, but brotherly word of instruction to fill the hole in their

understanding. Paul explained the distinction between the baptism of John (“the baptism of repentance”) and that of Jesus, the one that causes the recipient to “receive the Holy Spirit.” The whole conversation is one more indication that the New Testament does NOT distinguish between the sacrament of baptism and “baptism with the Holy Spirit.” Paul’s question clearly presumed that the Spirit was given through Christian baptism. The men accepted the correction and were, forthwith, “baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 5). It is the only recorded instance of re-baptism in the entire New Testament.

A final curious note is Luke’s observation that “there were about twelve men in all” (v. 7). For Jews and Christians this would be seen as more than a coincidence, for the number twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel and the number of apostles Jesus chose – a number maintained in the choosing of Matthias (1:26). Does Luke’s mention of the number indicate the start of a new phase of the church’s growth or perhaps the beginning of a nucleus of a congregation here in the strategic capital city of Asia? A new church had been planted.

THE LECTURE HALL OF TYRANNUS

ACTS 19:8-12

As was his standard procedure, Paul spent three months at the synagogue “reasoning and persuading” (v. 8). Then, in the face of rising opposition, Paul and some new disciples moved to “the hall of Tyrannus,” which he likely rented for a nominal fee to continue his daily encounters with all comers. It appears that his was a part-time use since Tyrannus himself needed the hall in the mornings and evenings. We guess that this was the case because one western Greek manuscript (footnoted in your Bible) adds to verse 9 that Paul’s daily sessions in the hall ran from “the fifth hour to the tenth” (11 a.m. to 4 p.m.). Contemporary sources explain that most people in Ephesus and other Ionian cities rested during the heat of the day. Paul could do his own tent-making work in the mornings, then go to the hall for his religious mission. It was such a good arrangement that Paul spent two years there.

His preaching and teaching were attended by miracles (described in a Greek phrase as “not of the ordinary kind”!). Luke explains that “handkerchiefs or aprons” (the Greek words denote the sweat cloths and work-aprons that were worn by workmen) that had touched him “were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them” (v. 12). We see here a parallel to the ministries of Jesus and Peter, where healings took place by a touching of Jesus’ cloak (Luke 8:44) and through Peter’s shadow (Acts 5:15). “The virtue, of course, lay not in the materials themselves but in the power of God...” (Longenecker).

THE SONS OF SCEVA AND THE HOLY BONFIRE

ACTS 19:13-22

News of such healings and exorcisms was bound to attract ever-widening interest. One group that took special note of Paul’s work were some “itinerant Jewish exorcists,” further identified as “seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva” (vv. 13–14). The use of magical names in incantations to drive out evil spirits was common in the ancient world, but especially prominent in Ephesus. Jewish exorcists were held in special esteem because the customary Jewish reticence about saying God’s name was considered a clue that they alone knew the true pronunciation of the “Ineffable Name” of God and were therefore most able to release its power (Longenecker).

A major flaw in their approach soon became evident, for the name of Jesus was clearly reduced to a magic charm: “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims” (v. 13). The demon in their subject answered them by saying, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” and with sudden and startling power the possessed man leaped on them and gave them all such a beating that they “fled out of that house naked and wounded” (v. 16). Like the girl in the movie *The Exorcist* who played with a Ouija board and discovered she was dealing with a power quite beyond her, these amateur exorcists learned the fearsome power of the evil spirits they so carelessly approached. It is a story that surely must give us pause as we consider how people today (even clergy!) might parrot the name of Jesus superficially without really knowing or loving Him.

Several commentators guess that Paul later approached and properly exorcised this man since news spread and a reverence for Jesus (and a fear of misusing His name!) blanketed the city. Many of Paul's new converts took the further step of making a clean break with their old magical practices and burned their books in what was surely a bonfire to remember (v. 19)! Leave it to Luke, with a historian's attention to detail, to report the books' worth as "fifty thousand pieces of silver" (recall the betrayal of Jesus for just "30 pieces of silver" in Matt. 26:15).

Even in the midst of this success, Paul looks ahead to the destination that was laid out in 1:8 and is guiding us through Acts: "I must also see Rome" (v. 21). His determination to re-visit Macedonia and Achaia, make a stop in Jerusalem, and then go to Rome introduces the final large section of the book. Here for the first time in this section we read of Paul's "helpers" Timothy and Erastus (v. 22), whom he sent ahead to Macedonia. He himself stayed on in Ephesus "for a while" — months, almost certainly. The three months at the synagogue, the two years at the lecture hall, and now this "while" add up to three years. Luke adds in v. 20 the fifth of his six summary statements: "the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily." There remains one astonishing story to tell about Paul's experience in Ephesus before his farewell.

DEMETRIUS AND THE GREAT RIOT

ACTS 19:23-41

The temple of Artemis (Diana) was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was roughly four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, measuring 425 feet long, 220 feet wide, and 60 feet high. The temple boasted 127 pillars of marble and an altar carved by the greatest Greek sculptor, Praxiteles. In the heart of the temple was the famous image of Artemis herself. The image was a black, squat, many-breasted figure signifying fertility — not beautiful, to be sure, but awesome because it was reputed to have fallen from heaven (see v. 35)! It's almost certain that what became the image of Artemis originated as a meteorite that was transformed into an object of worship.

The city hosted an annual festival of Artemis in March-April. Tourists flocked to it, and it proved to be a necessary source of income for Ephesus, especially as its harbor grew more and more clogged with silt from the river, causing a slow decline in the city's prominence in commerce. Demetrius and the silversmiths "made silver shrines of Artemis" that sold like hotcakes to the tourists. But a great danger to their business loomed! Demetrius gathered the city's union laborers (v. 25) and summarized the situation: "This Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.

For the crowd, Jews and Christians were both odious because both opposed idolatry. Finally it was left to the town clerk, the most important city official (and neither Jew nor Roman), to restore calm. He assured the throng that the deity of Artemis was unassailable and even defended the two missionaries as “neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess.”



And there is danger... that this trade of ours may come into disrepute” (vv. 26–27). He was mounting a financial rather than a theological defense of the goddess. To couch it in modern terms, “It’s the economy, stupid!”

The assembled workmen grabbed two other companions of Paul, Gaius and Aristarchus, and rushed into the 24,000-seat theater carved into the mountainside on the east side of the city, a place whose magnificent ruins can still be seen. Not lacking courage in the face of real danger, Paul wanted to confront the crowd, but his Ephesian converts would not let him enter the theater (v. 30). Even some of the “Asiarchs,” Roman officials whose duty it was to advance the emperor’s cult, advised against his going. They too opposed the worship of Artemis and were doubtless glad to see Paul was having impact on it.

The Jews did not want to become the target of the crowd’s fury, so they sent one of their own, a man named Alexander, to speak, probably to point out the differences between Jews and Christians. But when the crowd saw he was a Jew, they shouted him down. The chant, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians,” went on for two hours (v. 34)! For the crowd, Jews and Christians were both odious because both opposed idolatry. Finally it was left to the town clerk, the most important city official (and neither Jew nor Roman), to restore calm. He assured the throng that the deity of Artemis was unassailable and even defended the two missionaries as “neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess” (v. 37 — common complaints Gentiles made against Jews). In fact, he pointed out, there was a real danger that they themselves could be charged with rioting and face reprisals, including loss of some freedoms, by the Romans. In his own measured way, he hoped to accomplish the same thing as Demetrius — the protection of the status quo and their freedom to worship (and profit from!) Artemis. At long last, blessedly, the crowd dispersed.

It is likely, points out Richard Longenecker, that the riot was more dangerous than Luke’s account suggests. It may be that Paul’s comments to the Corinthians about the “wild beasts in Ephesus” (1 Cor. 15:32) and the “deadly peril” in Asia (2 Cor. 1:8–11) are in fact allusions to the dramatic developments that day.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 20:1–38

Gracious God, as I read the account of Paul's farewell, I remember the many good-bye's life brings. Help me, on those days, to look back with thanksgiving and forward with hope, mindful of Your promises. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Review

1. What particular challenges did the city of Ephesus pose to the Christian message?

2. What similarities do you see between the “disciples” Paul met in 19:1–7 and Apollos in 18:24–25?

Acts 20:1–12

3. Where are we now? Compare the stops in these verses with those in Journey 2 (use the maps in your Bible or from the internet).

4. Name the men who are now part of the missionary group (vv. 4–6). Remember the significance of the first-person “we”!

5. What glimpse do we get in v. 7 of the early Christian worship gatherings? What day of the week? Time of day (remember that the Jewish “day” began at sundown)? Place of meeting? Components of the gathering? Adherence to a schedule?

6. Eutychus is not the only person to fall asleep in church! What are the consequences? What similarities or differences do you see between what Paul does and what Elijah and Elisha did (1 Kings 17:21; 2 Kings 4:34–5)?

Acts 20:13–16

7. Compare verse 16 with verse 6. What two great Jewish feasts are in view? What time of year is this? What do these things tell you about Paul's “Jewishness”?

8. Use a map to trace the route the party took from Troas to Miletus. How far is Miletus from Ephesus?

Acts 20:17–38

9. When you say “good-bye,” do you like it short and sweet or more drawn out? Why? What's the hardest good-bye you've experienced?

10. Have you ever attended a farewell for a pastor? What were the “highs and lows” of that experience?
-
11. Paul addresses the “elders” from Ephesus. According to vv. 28–35, how would you characterize their assigned role?
-
12. Where in this speech do you find a summary of the Gospel? What is it?
-
13. What does he say about the conduct of his ministry in the following verses?
- v. 19 _____
- vv. 26–27 _____
- v. 31 _____
- vv. 33–34 _____
- v. 35 _____
14. Select one or two things you believe today’s pastors most need to hear in this speech.
-
15. What does Paul see coming next for him (see vv. 22–23, 25)? For them (vv. 29–30)? Why do you suppose he tells them these things?
-
16. What evidence of emotion do we read in these verses?
-
17. For you personally, what is the most striking lesson that emerges from reading about the missionary journeys?
-

Memory Challenge

ACTS 20:27–28 “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

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A Tearful Farewell



SAYING GOOD-BYE

Life is punctuated by partings. Some are temporary, some permanent. Many are tearful. Children leave the family nest for college or simply to be on their own. A spouse drives away on a business trip or to a conference. A soldier goes off to war. Friends move away. A pastor retires or takes a call to a new congregation. A family gathers for a funeral service. Meaningful moments all!

Because partings bring a host of emotions to the surface, a person’s final words often leave a lasting impression. Genesis 49 records Jacob’s blessing of his sons just before his death. Washington’s farewell address was printed in nearly every American newspaper and was widely read. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s cellmates recall that he said, as he was taken out to be hanged, “This is the end, but for me the beginning of life.” Some of us can recall a pastor’s final sermon or the parting words of love from a dying parent. Those moments, those words have a deep impact on us.

Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders made an impression on them and on his companions. His speech to them was a fitting conclusion to his mission journeys, and a dramatic prelude to his arrest, trials, and harrowing voyage to Rome. His talk that day provides not merely a summary of facts about his ministry, but a glimpse of the very human emotions that attended this man and the people whose lives he touched. In this lesson, we will take our place among the listeners at that memorable parting on the beach at Miletus.

GREECE RE-VISITED

ACTS 20:1-6

These few verses provide the briefest account of an extended ministry in all of Acts. Events that may have taken as long as a year (says Richard Longenecker) are highly compacted here. The story must be filled in by reference to Paul's letters (2 Corinthians and Romans) written during this time.

After his three-year stay in Ephesus, Paul traveled north to Troas, hoping to find Titus, whom he had earlier sent to Corinth. The missionary had a pastor's heart. He was troubled about conditions there, anxious to deal with individuals who were harshly critical of him and with a congregation beset by a score of problems (factions, lawsuits, sexual conduct, the role of spiritual gifts and more): "when we came into Macedonia... we were afflicted at every turn — fighting without and fear within" (2 Cor. 7:5). He was making his way to Corinth when he was at last reunited with Titus, who shared good news about the church at Corinth that brought him a measure of peace: "But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus... he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced" (2 Cor. 7:6-7).

Thus freed from his anxiety, Paul spent an unspecified amount of time in Macedonia, perhaps dispatching Titus northwest to Dalmatia (2 Tim. 4:10) while he himself traveled into Illyricum (Rom. 15:19), a

region known later as Yugoslavia. Finally he made his way back to Corinth where he spent three months, probably during winter of AD 56. All the while he was tending his pet project, the offering for relief of the saints in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8-9; Rom. 15:25-32 and elsewhere), something he felt would serve to strengthen the bond between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Desiring to bring that offering in person to the church in Jerusalem, he began the return journey through Macedonia, accompanied by seven men who were delegated by their congregations (2 Cor. 8:23) to bring their respective contributions to Jerusalem. These included Sopater of Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus of Thessalonica, Gaius of Derbe, Timothy of Lystra, and Tychicus and Trophimus from "Asia" (v. 4). Luke also joined the group at Philippi (vv. 5-6) and may have been the bearer of that congregation's offering. He was with Paul from this point on to the end of Acts.

Paul was still an observant Jew. Since he could not get to Jerusalem in time for Passover, "the days of Unleavened Bread" (v. 6) which fell in mid-April, he took time to celebrate the feast in Philippi and then made the voyage to Troas, which was evidently a difficult crossing, taking five days this time instead of the two days earlier (see 16:11). The group stayed for a week before continuing the journey.

THE RAISING OF EUTYCHUS

ACTS 20:7–12

It may be that the group lingered in Troas in order to participate in the weekly worship gathering there. Now that Luke is an eyewitness, the story is again replete with fascinating detail. From here on in Acts, we will hear much about ports of call, stopovers, and stories that read almost like a travel journal. This section provides us with one of the earliest accounts of a Christian worship service in the infant church.

By this time most Christian worship gatherings were no longer on the Sabbath, but on “the first day of the week” (v. 7 — hints of this also in 1 Cor. 16:2 and Rev. 1:10), doubtless in remembrance of the resurrection on that day. This passage is the earliest unambiguous evidence we have of believers gathering on Sundays. The service here described obviously took place in the evening, for Paul “prolonged his speech until midnight” (v. 7). There remains some uncertainty about whether the service began at sundown on Saturday night (as would be the Jewish understanding of when “Sunday” began) or on Sunday night. Evening, say some commentators, might have been the preferred time since many of the early Christians were likely slaves and slaves could only be free from work obligations at night.

The place of meeting, says Luke, was yet another “upper room,” as had previously been the case in Acts (1:13), a detail that will soon be important! The purpose of the gathering was to “break bread,” a term that normally refers to the Lord’s Supper (see 2:42, also 1 Cor. 10:16–17 and 11:17–34 and cf. Luke 24:35). The sacrament was either during or immediately after an “agape (love) meal,” a full meal to which all who were able contributed. Paul’s address to the people was not so much what we’d call a sermon as a prolonged discussion with them (Greek *dielegeto*, which gives us the English word “dialogue”).

Luke turns his attention to a “young man named Eutychus” (v. 9), a name that means “fortunate.” Unfortunately, Eutychus fell asleep as Paul went on and on that night — not the last person who would go to sleep in church! He happened to be perched in a windowsill, perhaps because he needed some fresh air with the “many lamps” burning. Suddenly he fell “from the third story and was taken up dead.” In light of what Paul says later, “Don’t be alarmed... he’s alive” (v. 10 NIV), there continues to be debate about whether he actually died or simply appeared that way to the startled worshippers. Paul himself went down and “bent over him” and took him up in his arms. His dealing with Eutychus, though more briefly told, so clearly parallels the resuscitations by Elijah (1 Kings 17:17–23) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:18–37), says Robert Smith, that Luke seems to suggest a raising from death. By this time, everyone was both wide awake and “not a little comforted” (v. 12) at this happy turn. A midnight meal (v. 11) and more conversation followed until “daybreak.”

HASTENING TO JERUSALEM

ACTS 20:13–16

Now Paul made all haste to get to Jerusalem in time for the other great feast still to come — the Feast of Pentecost — little more than a month away. The mission party boarded a ship for the 40-mile voyage around Cape Lectum to Assos, while Paul chose to walk the shorter (20 miles) and more direct overland route, possibly to have time alone with God. He rejoined his colleagues in Assos, from whence they sailed to Mitylene and then further south past Chios to Samos and finally to Miletus, an ancient port thirty miles on a direct line south of Ephesus. Paul had decided not to spend time in Asia, for he was “hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost” (v. 16). Richard Longenecker comments that “he evidently had preferred to forego the emotional strain of another parting with the entire Ephesian church and to avoid (possibly) some local danger.”

PAUL'S TEARFUL FAREWELL

ACTS 20:17–38

“Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him” (v. 17). Since their ship likely had to load and unload cargo in Miletus, there was time to dispatch a messenger and for the elders to make the trip (by coast road considerably more than 30 miles) over land to see him. The absence of cell phones and automobiles made this a much larger undertaking than it would be for us now!

What follows now is Paul’s only recorded speech to a purely Christian audience in Acts. It contains a number of themes we encounter in his letters such as “grace” (as in the salutations of all his letters), “faith” (Rom. 3:28; Eph. 2:8–9; Phil. 3:9), “inheritance” (Gal 3:18; Col. 3:24), “sanctified” (Rom. 15:16; 1 Thess. 5:23), and more. This speech to the Ephesian elders, in fact, reads like a miniature Pauline epistle! It has four main parts, each introduced with a “formula” phrase, as follows:

Part One (vv. 18–21) – introduced by “You yourselves know” — a review of Paul’s past ministry resembling 1 Thess. 2:1–12.

Part Two (vv. 22–24) – introduced by “And now, behold” — a description of his coming trip to Jerusalem and what he expects there.

Part Three (vv. 25–31) – introduced by “And now, behold” — a look into the future of Paul himself and the church in Ephesus.

Part Four (vv. 32–35) – introduced by “And now” — a blessing and final exhortation, quoting Jesus.

PART ONE is a defense of his ministry approach in light of criticism from Jewish opponents. He reminds the elders that his ministry among them began with “humility and... tears and... trials” through the “plots” of those Jews (v. 19). His ministry *approach* was “teaching you in public and from house to house” (v. 20). His *message*, in summary, was “repentance toward God and... faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 21). He later speaks of how “God... obtained [the church] with his own blood” (v. 28), a very clear pronouncement of the deity of Christ (cf. Rom. 9:5). Was anything missing, as his opponents might allege? No, for “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable” (v. 20). His was a message wholly sufficient for their salvation.

PART TWO explains to the elders what lies immediately ahead. “I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit” (v. 22). Curiously, the same Holy Spirit who is constraining him to go is at the same time warning him “that imprisonment and afflictions await me” (v. 23). It is a testimony to Paul’s courageous obedience to God in the face of certain trouble. Would we be so willing to head into danger if God made it clear what lay ahead? Paul speaks, truly, like a man with a “magnificent obsession,” like a runner with a single-minded focus to “finish my course” (cf. 2 Tim. 4:7) no matter what the cost. It is the *message*, not the *messenger*, that matters: “I do not account my life of any value” (v. 24).

PART THREE reads like a prophecy in which Paul unfolds what lies ahead for himself and the church in Ephesus. “I know that none of you... will see my face again” (v. 25). Was this expressing his conviction that he would be martyred, as some think, or was it anticipating his determination to begin a new mission to the west of Rome, all the way to Spain (Rom. 15:23–29), as others think? In either case, he was telling them that he felt free of further responsibility because he had done all that he could do. “I did my job,” he tells them in effect, “now you do yours!”

The elders in Ephesus have a clear assignment: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God” (v. 28). It remains an excellent summary of the task of every pastor or bishop in the church today. Their task will be to remain “alert” (v. 31), because they will face persecutions from outside (“fierce wolves”) and apostasy from within: “From among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (v. 30). Interestingly, the letter to the church in Ephesus (Rev. 2:1–7) contains the Lord’s sad description of what happened there later on: “you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

PART FOUR is Paul’s final word of blessing (v. 32 — “I commend you to God and the word of his grace”) and exhortation based on his own example (v. 35 — “I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak”). The words of Jesus cited here — “it is more blessed to give than

to receive” — appear in none of the four Gospels, though they bear some resemblance to the words in Luke 6:38 (“give, and it will be given to you”).

In our day, pastors are often asked to furnish a self-evaluation that can be used to introduce them to a calling congregation. This speech demonstrates how Paul might have done that task. Which pastor would not find a rich reminder here of the need for humility (v. 19), hard work (v. 35), boldness (vv. 20, 27), attentive spiritual care for people (v. 28), and selfless generosity (vv. 33–35). He did not shrink from using himself as a “role model.” We would do well to imitate him!

Striking is the open admission of and display of emotion by both Paul and his listeners that day. From the opening words about his service “with tears” (v. 19), through his impassioned prediction about the “afflictions” awaiting him and the “wolves” about to attack his people, to the final heart-rending description of how he “knelt down and prayed with them all” there on the beach, we find ourselves moved to join the “weeping” that day. We have known the sorrow that we might not see a beloved face again, and the embraces and kisses that flow from hearts that have known those blessed “ties that bind our hearts in Christian love”!

Such farewells must come. But we do not shrink from them, for we await the day when all tears shall be wiped away, and we hear our Lord say to us: “Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your master” (Matt 25:23).

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 21:1-36

Lord God, go before me in times of uncertainty or danger, and grant me Your strengthening presence, so that I may serve You fearlessly. Bless my study of Your Word to that end, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Review

1. Explain the purposes Paul had in returning from his mission journey to Jerusalem.

2. What does this chapter reveal about early Christian worship?

3. What, for you, was the most memorable part of Paul's farewell address?

Acts 21:1-16

4. Track this final part of the journey to Jerusalem on a map.

5. What detail in v. 4 replays the story of Jesus and His disciples?

6. When we met Philip in Chapter 6, he might have been called "Philip the _____."

Here in v. 8 he is called "Philip the _____."

What are we told about his daughters? (cf. 1 Cor. 11:5 NIV)

7. For a second time we meet Agabus (see 11:27-29 for his earlier prophecy). How does he deliver his message here?

How is it similar to the message of Jeremiah in Jer. 19:1-11?

8. Had you been present to hear Agabus, what would you have advised Paul to do? Do you think his reaction was courageous... or reckless?

9. Have you ever made a big decision against the advice of people you loved and trusted? If so, what was the result?

Acts 21:17-26

10. What pressure do James and other leaders face as Paul arrives? How do they describe the status of the "believing Jews" (Jewish Christians!)? What is the charge they anticipate those people making against Paul?

11. What course of action does James advocate in vv. 23–24?

12. What does Paul do (or refrain from doing) in the following passages about “being a Jew”?

Acts 18:18 _____

1 Cor. 9:20–21 _____

Acts 16:3 _____

Gal. 2:3 _____

How would you summarize Paul’s principles in the “law versus freedom” debate running through the New Testament?

13. Paul faces another decision here in Jerusalem — whether to harden or to bend. What does he choose? Why do you think he decides as he does?

14. Where do you personally “draw the line” in deciding when to take a stand? Over what contemporary issue are you most likely to do that?

15. To understand the head-shaving, the sacrifice, and the seven days, read Numbers 6:1–20 (directions for the Nazirite vow). What do you learn?

Acts 21:27–36

16. Who are Paul’s accusers in vv. 27ff.? Are they the same people James and other leaders warn Paul about in vv. 20–21? What’s the accusation? (Note verse 29!)

17. Have you ever been falsely accused of anything? Who did it, and why?

18. How is Paul “rescued” and by whom? (For the identity of his rescuer, see 23:26.)

19. “Away with him!” is the cry of the crowd. Compare this scene with Luke 23:18; John 19:15.

20. Where are the strongest voices of criticism raised against the church today?

Memory Challenge

ACTS 21:13 *“What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”*



ACTS

ACTS 21:1-36

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A Prophecy and an Arrest



PROPHETS ANCIENT AND MODERN

Can you name a prophet? Ask a Christian and you'll probably hear the name of one of the biblical prophets: Elijah, Isaiah, Daniel, or perhaps Jonah, the reluctant prophet. Almost certainly no one current. Prophecy happened in Bible times and not now, right? Ask someone unchurched or unfamiliar with the Bible, and you may get a quizzical look. People know the word, but they are not sure if the phenomenon of prophecy is to be taken seriously. They've seen the cartoons of the bearded man on the corner with his sign: "The end is near!" They may have seen titles in a bookstore about Edgar Cayce or Nostradamus. Smiles may follow.

But the idea of serious prophecy lingers. In public discourse these days, instead of labeling someone with the title "prophet," we more readily use the word "prophetic." Martin Luther King, Jr. is still widely regarded by people churched and unchurched as a prophetic voice summoning the nation to consider not the color of one's skin but "the content of one's character." Are we Christians willing to listen for the prophets who speak in our time?

Prophecy, we point out in Bible classes, doesn't necessarily mean "prediction" so much as it means "speaking for God" in words of judgment and grace as one addresses societal evils or ecclesiastical follies. And yet, here and there come words that do predict, and events that come true as predicted! Some of us have had experiences that defy

easy explanation. This writer was pulled aside by a woman years ago after a worship service. “I have something to tell you and your wife,” she said with measured seriousness. We sat with her privately a few minutes later, astonished to hear her say, “As I sat in church today three things came to me... Sue is expecting a baby. The baby will be a boy. And next year at this time, you’ll be gone from here.” As it turned out, she was right on every count! Would you call that “prophecy”? Does God still do this?

Acts 21 brings us face-to-face with a number of “prophets.” Some are unnamed disciples who speak to Paul “through the Spirit.” Four are the daughters of Philip the Evangelist. One is Agabus, who makes an ominous prediction about Paul. Within days, his words come true. The story summons us to a humble sort of listening for the voice of God, even if it sometimes comes in unexpected ways.

THE PROPHECY OF AGABUS

ACTS 21:1–16

The departure from Miletus was gut-wrenching. The Greek words say that Paul and his companions had “torn” themselves away (21:1 NIV) after an emotional farewell to the Ephesian elders. Now they undertook the final leg of the journey back to Jerusalem. There is a sense of haste in the story stemming from Paul’s determination to get to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost and deliver the special offering from the Gentile churches for the relief of their Jewish fellow believers. The party sailed to Cos, Rhodes, and Patara on successive days. At Patara, they exited their smaller coastal vessel and boarded a larger, faster freighter to cross 400 miles of open ocean directly to Tyre (v. 2). While the ship discharged its cargo, Paul searched out the Christian congregation in that city (v. 4) and spent a week with them.

Paul already suspected that his trip to Jerusalem to deliver the offering would be dangerous (Rom. 15:30–32). Now there come several inspired warnings, starting in Tyre, that confirm his suspicions. In the same way Peter once tried to prevent Jesus from going to Jerusalem (Matt. 16:21–22), the disciples in Tyre tried to talk Paul out of going. Luke says they spoke “through the Spirit” (v. 4), which marks it as not merely good advice, but prophetic speech! Some have wondered why Paul didn’t obey the warnings. Wasn’t he disobeying God? Others respond that these prophetic words were simply intended to show Paul and his companions what lay in store for him in Jerusalem. As in Jesus’ case (Luke 9:51), Paul had “set his face” to go and would not be persuaded otherwise.

Once more, as in Miletus, there was a parting and prayer on the beach. Back aboard the ship they went to make the 25-mile voyage from Tyre to Ptolemais (modern-day Acre) where they spent a day with the “brothers” (v. 7). The last stop before Jerusalem was Caesarea, where Paul and his companions sojourned with Philip, the one-time deacon (“one of the seven”) who was now called “the evangelist” (v. 8). Having evangelized Samaria and the coastal region (8:5–40), he now resided in Caesarea where Peter’s encounter with Cornelius had taken place.

Here too there are “prophets.” Philip had “four unmarried daughters, who prophesied” (v. 9), a reminder that the prediction of Joel in Peter’s Pentecost sermon was coming true: “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (2:17; Joel 2:28). The phenomenon of “prophecy,” something to be distinguished from preaching, was practiced by both men and women, and was widespread enough in the early church that Paul had to give the Corinthians instruction about the correct procedure (head covering) for prophesying in worship (1 Cor. 11:4–5).

On the heels of the mention of Philip's daughters, we meet the prophet Agabus for a second time in Acts (see 11:27–29 for his earlier prophecy). His message is delivered with a symbolical act reminiscent of Jeremiah (Jer. 19:1–11) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 4:1–17) of old. With dramatic flair, he took Paul's belt and bound his own hands and feet before making the pronouncement, "This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles" (v. 11)! Here and elsewhere, Paul's journey to Jerusalem is likened to that of Jesus. The geographic movements so prominent in Luke and Acts make clear that while Jesus' final journey *ends* there, Paul's *begins* in Jerusalem and ends in Rome.

The party, whose numbers had swelled with disciples from Caesarea, at long last "went up to Jerusalem" (v. 15), a journey of 65 miles. Jerusalem, Luke points out in his Gospel, is a place of prophetic destiny, a city where God's prophets are persecuted and killed (Luke 13:33–34). Either in Jerusalem or very close to the city, they introduce Paul to Mnason, one of several Cypriot disciples mentioned in Acts (4:36, 11:19–20), and the group stays at his home.

The success of the Gospel among the Jews, along with the success of Paul's mission, had put the church in Jerusalem in a delicate situation. It was caught between its Jewish roots and its Gentile fruits.



PURIFICATION AT THE TEMPLE

ACTS 21:17–26

Paul was treated to a warm welcome in Jerusalem: "the brothers received us gladly" (v. 17). One reason was probably the delivery, at last, of the special relief offering, though Luke says nothing of it here. Another reason may have been an excited interest in the report Paul brought about his Gentile mission. Luke tells us that "he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry" (v. 19). An enthusiastic doxology followed.

But the enthusiasm of the leaders of the Jerusalem church was tempered by anxious concerns that needed addressing immediately. The success of the Gospel among the Jews, along with the success of Paul's mission, had put the church in Jerusalem in a delicate situation. It was caught between its Jewish roots and its Gentile fruits, between its loyalty to the nation and its fraternal relations with Paul and his Gentile mission. James and the elders summarized it this way for Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses..." (vv. 20–21). The charge had already been circulated against Paul that he was encouraging Jews to abandon their ancestral faith

and its practices. He was, some said, a false teacher espousing a doctrinally dangerous position! In spite of the careful work of the Jerusalem Council to reach a compromise six years earlier, the issue of Jews and Gentiles persisted. “What then is to be done?” (v. 22).

It is clear that they had given the matter some thought before Paul and company arrived, for a proposal was floated almost without a pause for breath: “We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you” (vv. 23–24). In other words, “We’ve accepted your mission and your offering. Now you do your part!”

James is urging Paul to make an unmistakable demonstration of his “Jewishness” by undertaking a costly act of piety that will silence the objections. He is to help four men fulfill their Nazarite vows. Such vows were usually undertaken in thanks for some blessing from God’s hand. According to Numbers 6, the vow required a person to abstain from wine and other grape products and let his (or her) hair grow. At the end, the hair was shaved and presented as an offering, along with two lambs, a ram, unleavened bread, cakes of flour and unleavened wafers mixed with oil, and a drink offering (Num. 6:13–15). Presenting all this was a costly undertaking for one person. If Paul would sponsor and pay for all four, it would be proof, said James, “that you yourself also live in observance of the law” (v. 24). James concludes with a reminder that the decision of the Council (15:19–21), still in effect, was an

instructive compromise. Paul would do well to respond in a way that would make for peace. After this episode, we hear no more of James and the elders in the Book of Acts.

James’ directive brought Paul to a critical moment. Over the years of his mission to the Gentiles, he had carefully worked out a way he could be “all things to all men” (1 Cor. 9:19–23). On one hand, he and other Jews could still be Jewish. He honored his Jewish heritage and that of his people by observing his own vows (18:18), circumcising the half-Jew Timothy (16:3), and urging abstention from “unclean” foods to protect those with scruples (Rom. 14:13–15 and 1 Cor. 8:1–13) where he felt there would be no compromise of the Gospel. On the other hand, don’t make Gentiles become Jews! He stood up for the freedom of his Gentile converts when he felt that they were being forced to go beyond the Council’s decree to observe the Old Testament legal requirements to be acceptable to God. Accordingly, he resisted circumcising Gentile Titus (Gal. 2:3), and he criticized Peter for “forcing” Gentiles to obey food requirements (Gal. 2:12–14). The principle? Let the Jews do what the Law requires with freedom and joy, not to impress God or earn His favor. Meanwhile, do not force Gentiles to do the same, lest they think salvation comes by the Law.

Here in Jerusalem, Paul did not harden himself against James’ request. The four men, all Jews, had the freedom to *be Jews* and keep their vows, just as he had the freedom to help them pay the costs. It would make for peace, for it would be clear he was not forcing the Jews to abandon Moses, as his opponents charged.

BEATEN BY A MOB, ARRESTED BY THE ROMANS

ACTS 21:27-36

All was going well, and Paul was nearly across the finish line. “The seven days [of purification] were almost completed” (v. 27) when things went terribly wrong. A group of Jewish pilgrims from Asia (probably Ephesus) recognized Paul. Having seen him earlier with Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, they assumed (wrongly) that Paul had brought him into the court reserved for Jews in the temple. They grabbed Paul, shouting accusations that he had attacked the Law and the temple and brought a Gentile into the Jewish court.

This last was a capital offense! A stone balustrade called the Soreg, which Josephus claimed was 3 cubits (four and a half feet) high, separated the court of the Gentiles and the court of the Jews. Paul may have been referring to this when he wrote of “the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14). Thirteen stone markers were placed in the balustrade at intervals containing this stern warning in Hebrew and Greek:

Let no Gentile enter within the balustrade and enclosure surrounding the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will be personally responsible for his consequent death.

Everyone, both Jew and Roman, took these signs seriously! It was the only offense for which the Romans allowed the Jews to carry out the death penalty. Paul Maier writes how the Roman general Titus later

attested to the authority of these signs: “Have we not given you permission to put to death any who pass beyond [these notices], even if he were Roman?” Facing immediate execution by stoning, Paul was dragged out of inner court. Temple police at once shut the gates to prevent the inner courts from being defiled by the tumult and possible bloodshed.

Paul’s rescue came from an unlikely source. There were Roman troops in the nearby Fortress Antonia. The fortress, built by Herod the Great, was adjacent to the temple, connected by two flights of steps. To keep order during festivals, it was garrisoned with a cohort of 1,000 men. Rome insisted on civil order and a riot was unforgivable, both for the populace who staged it and for the commander who allowed it. Hearing the tumult in the temple, the Romans made haste to intervene.

The cohort’s commander was a tribune (the Greek calls him a “chiliarch,” a commander of 1,000) named Claudius Lysias (see 23:26). The Romans arrested Paul, binding him with chains to a soldier on either side. When the tribune inquired about Paul’s identity and offense, the din and confusion of the mob rendered the attempt useless. The tribune ordered Paul to be brought “into the barracks,” and the soldiers hoisted Paul out of the mob’s reach and carried him up the stairs. In a scene eerily reminiscent of the mob that confronted Jesus, the people cried, “Away with him!” (Luke 23:18, John 19:15).

Robert Smith summarizes the parallels between the “passion of Paul” and that of Jesus with the following list from Acts 20–22:

<i>JESUS' PASSION</i>		<i>PAUL'S PASSION</i>
Luke 9:22, 44, 18:31–33	Predicted 3 times	Acts 20:23, 21:4, 11
Matt. 16:21–22, Mark 8:32	Friends try to dissuade	Acts 21:12
(By Jesus) Luke 22:42	Submission to God's will	(By friends) Acts 21:14
All Four Gospels	Hearing before the Sanhedrin	Acts 22:30ff.
Matt. 26:61, Luke 23:2	The accusation — he subverts nation, Temple	Acts 21:28
Luke 23:18, John 19:15	Rejection by the people — “Away with him!”	Acts 21:36, 22:22

The prophecies had come true. The events displayed the will of God at work in the arrest of Paul and its aftermath, just as that will had been at work in the passion of Jesus. Now begins the inexorable journey to Rome, the final portion of the Book of Acts.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 21:37–23:11

Lord God, as I study the way Paul tells his story, open my eyes to the unique and wonderful ways You have been at work in my life as well. Show me how my story can glorify Your name and help other people. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Review

1. What does the prophet Agabus do that parallels Jeremiah and Ezekiel?

2. We again see James exercise his leadership in the church. What proposal does he make to Paul to settle the anxieties of the Jewish believers?

3. Share with your small group some discoveries you have made in the past few chapters of Acts.

Acts 21:37–40

4. A case of mistaken identity. Who did the tribune think Paul was? What tipped him off that he was mistaken?

5. How does Paul identify himself? What's his request?

Acts 22:1–21

6. List at least 4 ways Paul tries to say, "I'm one of you."

7. Paul retells his conversion story. Anything different between this account and the one in Chapter 9? (See especially what's said about Ananias)

8. If you have not already done so, share the story of your faith journey with your small group — in three minutes or less!

9. What part of your personal life story do you like to re-tell as a way of explaining to people who you are and what you value?

Acts 22:22–29

10. What does Paul say that makes the crowd stop listening? Why?

11. Having rescued Paul earlier from the mob, why do you suppose the heretofore-friendly tribune ordered Paul to be examined by “flogging”? What puts a stop to this plan?

12. Paul’s Roman citizenship becomes an important issue. Contrast the way the tribune and Paul got their citizenship. Which way was better? How had Paul’s citizenship been an asset on his mission journeys (see 16:37–38)?

13. How may a person become an American citizen? Enumerate some of the “rights” of American citizenship. Which are especially important to you?

14. The tribune was “afraid” when he learned Paul was a citizen. What might have happened to the tribune for punishing a Roman citizen?

Acts 22:30–23:11

15. In vv. 1–5, how does Paul demonstrate his respect for Jewish law?

16. Ananias was high priest from AD 47–59. He had a reputation for cruelty and violence and was later assassinated by the Jews! What does Paul call him and what does the term mean?

17. Why does Paul change the subject (to the resurrection)? What theological issues divide the two parties? Who are the “conservatives”? Who are the “liberals”?

18. Once more God speaks to Paul. Compare what God says here with what God had said years earlier to the “other” Ananias (9:15–16) and to Paul himself (18:9–10).

19. How has the Lord encouraged you during hard times?

Memory Challenge

Review what you have learned thus far

PAUL IDENTIFIES HIMSELF – ACTS 21:37–40	149
PAUL TELLS HIS STORY TO THE CROWD – ACTS 22:1–21	149
A ROMAN CITIZEN HAS RIGHTS! – ACTS 22:22–29	150
FACING THE SANHEDRIN – ACTS 22:30–23:10	151
AN ENCOURAGING VISION – ACTS 23:11	152
PERSONAL APPLICATION – ACTS 23:1–24:27	153

Testimony in Jerusalem

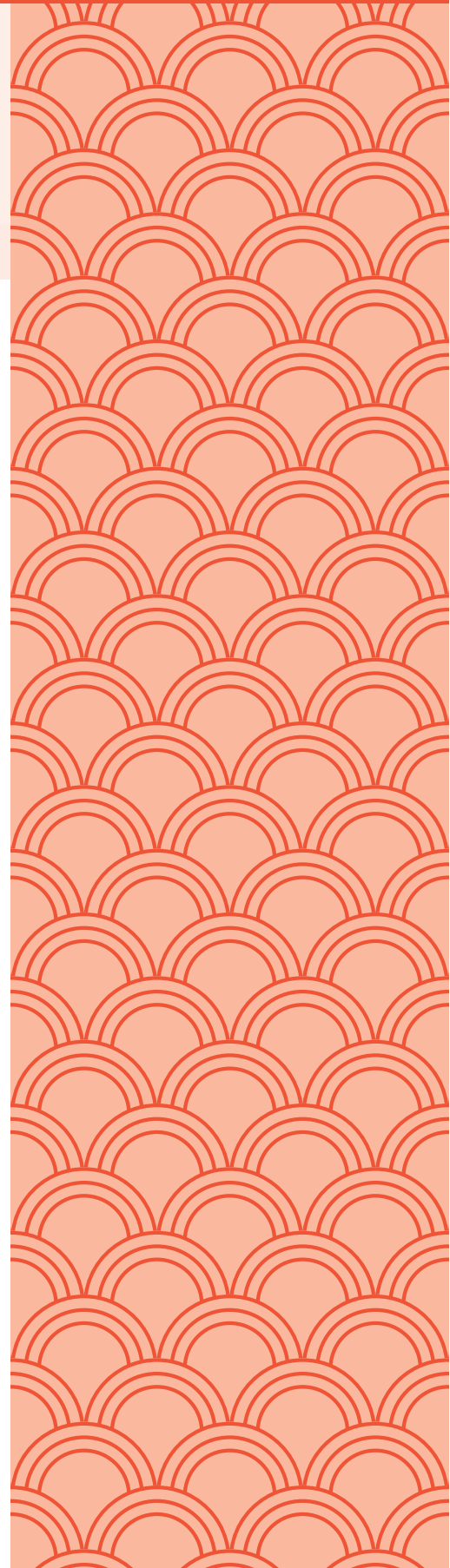


CITY AT THE CENTER OF HISTORY

It isn't the world's LARGEST city. That honor goes to Tokyo, Japan, with 38 million inhabitants at this writing! It isn't the oldest city. Damascus, Syria, has been continuously inhabited much longer. New York City is far more powerful economically. But it may be said that over the last 2,000 years, no city in the world has been as important to the hearts, minds, and faith of people as Jerusalem. It has been and still is "the city at the center of history."

Jerusalem has been fought over again and again: captured by King David, conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, destroyed by the Roman general Titus, rebuilt by the Jews, taken by the Arabs under Caliph Omar, then by the Crusaders under Godfrey of Bouillon, then by Saladin and his Saracens, then by others. It has not stopped. In June of 1967, during the astonishing Six-Day War, Israeli tanks rolled in through the Stephen Gate to capture the city yet again. It is still the most volatile piece of real estate in the world.

Jerusalem is the world's "holiest" city, of vast importance to three of the world's great religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Its name is uttered by millions of lips daily. Its glories are chanted in hundreds of songs. No city is mentioned so frequently in the Bible — nearly 800 times. That suggests it is important not only to people, but to God



Himself! There He sent Jesus on history's most urgent rescue mission, the redemption of the world by His death and resurrection.

Luke the Evangelist makes Jerusalem the geographic hub of his two books. In Luke, Jesus “set his face” toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51) where He will die and rise again. In Acts, the drama begins at Jerusalem, the capital city of Judaism, and ends at Rome, the capital city of the Gentile world. The final part of Acts narrates the arrest, trials, and testimony of Paul, starting in Jerusalem.

As we read the story, we remember that we too are citizens of that holy city, linked to its past, pulled forward to its future, the “Jerusalem above” (Gal. 4:26). Open your Bible to Acts 21 where Paul begins his defense before the Jews and Romans. It is early summer of AD 57, and you are there!

PAUL IDENTIFIES HIMSELF

ACTS 21:37–40

Paul has been set upon by a mob. In the nick of time, he has been rescued by a squad of Roman soldiers. The mob is still buzzing angrily as the soldiers carry him up the steps to Fortress Antonia. Near the doorway, Paul speaks to the tribune in Greek, “May I say something to you?” (v. 37). Hearing Paul speak Greek is a surprise to tribune Claudius Lysias: “Do you know Greek?” He has assumed Paul is the trouble-making pseudo-prophet from Egypt who three years earlier had led 4,000 “men of the Assassins” out of the desert to attack Jerusalem (v. 38). “Assassins” (also called “Zealots”) hid daggers in their robes, stabbed soldiers in crowds, and then slipped away in the confusion. But Paul is not that man.

He turns to the tribune. “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia” he explains, “a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people” (v. 39). Lysias nods to his men, who set Paul down. Turning to the throng, he raises his hands until things grow

quiet. Using the steps of the fortress as his pulpit, he switches to Aramaic (literally “the Hebrew dialect”) as he addresses them (v. 40). Once more he fulfills the prophecy that Jesus Himself had spoken to Ananias years earlier: “He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (9:15). Here in Jerusalem Paul now begins the great defense that will take him finally to Rome.

PAUL TELLS HIS STORY TO THE CROWD

ACTS 22:1–21

Paul's speech to the crowd is the first in his final series of speeches in Acts (see 23:1–6, 24:10–21, 26:2–23, and 28:17–28). He begins respectfully, even affectionately: “Brothers and fathers” (v. 1), the identical address Stephen had used before this same group years earlier (7:2). Every detail marks him as one of them, beginning with “I am a Jew” (v. 3). The terms “born,” “brought up,” and “educated” were three standard terms in ancient biographies. Traditionalists in the crowd would appreciate his mention of Gamaliel, probably the most revered rabbi of that day. “According to the strict manner of the law of our fathers” identifies him as a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5), a party all Jews respect. He tells them, in effect, “I'm no apostate, no renegade. I'm fervently loyal to God, just like you!”

Paul launches into a summary of his conversion from persecutor to Christian evangelist. Paul's story rehearses the earlier telling in Chapter 9, with a few slight changes along with several more significant ones. Here, for the benefit of the traditionalist crowd he faces, he adds that Ananias was “a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there” (v. 12). A pious Jew, do you hear? Ananias, he says, called Jesus “the Righteous One” (v. 14) and directed him to do what he is doing now: “you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard” (v. 15). That word “everyone” explains his outreach to the Gentiles.

Now Paul adds something Luke has not reported before. Paul tells of yet another vision, a “trance” while he was “praying in the temple” (v. 17). Ironically it was in the very beating heart of Judaism, the temple, where Paul was warned by Jesus Himself that he must leave Jerusalem because “they will not accept your testimony about me” (v. 18). Paul tells the crowd how he protested to the Lord of his fierce loyalty to Judaism and his willingness to persecute Jesus’ followers. Surely his listeners would be curious to inquire about the power that could effect such a transformation! Surely they would notice that the Christians Paul persecuted had not separated themselves from the synagogue (v. 19)! They too are loyal Jews! The climax of his vision is Paul’s own private great commission: “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles” (v. 21).

Roman citizenship was a highly prized right, conferred only on those of high standing or those who had served Rome with distinction, along with their children.



A ROMAN CITIZEN HAS RIGHTS!

ACTS 22:22–29

Mention of the Gentiles “far away” breaks the spell and elicits an angry outburst from the crowd. They hear Paul saying that Gentiles can be approached directly without first being related to the nation and its hallowed institutions! “This was tantamount,” says Longenecker, “to placing Jews and Gentiles on equal footing before God... the height of apostasy indeed!” Fearing that Paul’s work will dismantle the distinct place and privilege of the Jews, the mob reprises its earlier fury and shouts him down: “Away with such a fellow from the earth!” They echo what the Good Friday mob had shouted about Jesus (Luke 23:18). The tribune, who likely did not understand Paul’s speech in Aramaic, understands very well that something has gone wrong. It is his job to control this chaos, and he cannot do it without a clear idea of what has upset the mob. Accordingly he orders Paul brought inside the barracks where he is stripped and tied to a pillar (vv. 24–25). A flogging on his bare back will wring it out of him in short order!

The practice of flogging involved the use of a flagellum, made of leather thongs studded with pieces of metal or bone and fastened to a wooden handle. Its use could cripple or even kill. Paul had earlier received 39 lashes at the hands of Jewish authorities and three times been beaten with rods by Roman magistrates (most recently at 16:22–24). But flogging was far more brutal than either of those. Paul was at the brink of the same punishment that left Jesus so weak from loss of blood that someone else had to carry His cross (Matt. 27:26; Mark 15:21).

Before the investigation can commence, Paul plays his trump card: “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?” (v. 25). Paul doubtless remembers how his citizenship led to his release from prison in Philippi (16:37–38) and realizes he needs it to avoid a life-threatening flogging. His question is a bombshell to the centurion heading the detail. Roman citizens were exempt from examination under torture. Such a claim, punishable by death if untrue, was automatically taken at face value. The centurion immediately halts the proceedings and reports back to Lysias. “This man is a Roman citizen!”

Any legal proceedings required that there had to be a formulation of charges and penalties, then a formal accusation, then a hearing before a Roman magistrate before any kind of punishment could be administered. Roman citizenship was a highly prized right, conferred only on those of high standing or those who had served Rome with distinction, along with their children. Over time there rose another path to citizenship, taken by those who could bribe an administrator to have their names registered. New citizens had their names recorded on one of thirty-five lists at Rome and on a local municipal register. This was how the tribune had attained his citizenship (v. 28 — “I bought this citizenship for a large sum”). Paul’s response (“But I am a citizen by birth”) makes it clear which route to citizenship was more highly esteemed!

The tribune is understandably “afraid” when he learns Paul is a citizen, for he himself might be subjected to this or some other dreadful punishment. Examination under

torture is now out of the question. Some other way of determining the nature of the charge must be found. His solution? Bring Paul before the Sanhedrin.

FACING THE SANHEDRIN

ACTS 22:30–23:10

Lysias still needs to have an explanation for the riot, so he convenes a meeting of the Sanhedrin the next morning. The Sanhedrin is the “Supreme Court” of the Jews, consisting of 70–100 men, a mix of Pharisees and Sadducees. They sit in a semi-circle, backed by three more rows of “disciples,” while clerks (scribes) sit in front taking notes. The meeting begins badly. As Paul begins to make his case, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience...” (v. 1), someone in the assembly shouts, “Strike him on the mouth!” Incensed, Paul shouts back, rightly accusing the speaker of being a hypocrite, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!” (v. 3).

The speaker, it turns out, is none other than the high priest Ananias (another Ananias!), who presided over the Sanhedrin from AD 48–59. He has a reputation for greed, confiscating the tithes intended for use by the ordinary priests, and he uses violence to impose his will. Paul’s words prove eerily prophetic, for Ananias will later be assassinated by the Jews during the war with Rome in AD 66. “Would you revile God’s high priest?” asks someone sitting near Paul (v. 4). Paul’s response demonstrates his genuine Jewishness, for he responds respectfully, even citing Ex. 22:28, “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people’” (v. 5). Would someone who opposed the Law have answered in such a way?

Some students have asked why Paul would not recognize Ananias as high priest. Was it a case of poor eyesight (some cite Gal. 4:13–15 as evidence)? Was it perhaps the case that Ananias was not sitting in his usual place or wearing his customary attire because this was not a “regular” meeting of the Sanhedrin? It must also be recalled that Paul had visited Jerusalem only sporadically in the past twenty years and would not have known the high priest by sight.

We are not told how long the meeting lasted, but at some point, Paul himself turned it in an entirely different direction. “When Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out... ‘Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial’” (v. 6). His claim about the resurrection was at the heart of things for him (so he argued in 1 Cor. 15). It was also brilliant tactically, for he realized that raising this issue would “divide and conquer” his opponents in the Sanhedrin! The conservative Sadducees, Luke points out, “say there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit,” while the liberal Pharisees “acknowledge them all” (v. 8). The resultant debate steadily rises in volume until the assembly is paralyzed and turns violent. Lysias, who has been standing by as an observer until now, hoping to get a clue about the charges against Paul, realizes that he will have to intervene to save Paul from harm. So for the second time in two days, Paul is

wrestled away from a melee by Roman soldiers and taken back to their barracks in Fortress Antonia. Now what?

AN ENCOURAGING VISION

ACTS 23:11

Paul had feared such a reception at Jerusalem (see 20:22–23, 21:13, and Rom. 15:31). Now it seemed that those fears were being realized, and even this man with his considerable courage must have been discouraged. He had planned to go to Rome and perhaps even to Spain to preach the Gospel, but now it appeared that his life might end here where Jesus was put to death.

But “the following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome’” (v. 11). Once more there comes a heartening vision in which Jesus, who first met Paul on the Damascus Road, comes to reassure Paul, as he had done in Corinth (18:9–10) and in Jerusalem years earlier (22:17–21).

First in Jerusalem. Then in Rome. Nothing would stop the proclamation of the Good News of God’s grace to the Jews and Gentiles. Astonishingly, it would be this present trouble, this imprisonment, these very charges that would propel Paul to stand at last before governors and kings to testify to the grace of God in Christ Jesus that had found and transformed his own life.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 23:1–24:27

Lord, “through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come.” Yet here I am, a recipient of Your gracious care! As I study Your Word, show me once more how You can use any situation to work for my good and for the glory of Your name. For Jesus’ sake, I ask it. Amen.

Review

1. Why might Jerusalem be called “The city at the center of history”? What is its importance in Luke and Acts?

2. How was Roman citizenship obtained and what were some of its privileges?

3. Identify some ways that Paul affirmed his “Jewishness” to his opponents.

Acts 23:12–22

4. Describe the particulars of the plot against Paul’s life. Why do you suppose the Jews felt Paul was still so dangerous they had to kill him?

5. Paul sends his nephew to the tribune. Considering what God has already told him (in 23:11), is Paul showing a lack of faith in God’s promise? Why or why not?

6. What risk might Paul’s nephew have taken in this story? When have you had to take a risk in obedience to God?

Acts 23:23–35

7. How many soldiers are assigned to guard Paul? Why this elaborate security?

8. The tribune sends a letter to Governor Felix. What has the tribune decided to do with the “Paul problem”?

9. How do Paul’s experiences with the Roman authorities thus far correspond to his teaching about governing authorities in Rom. 13:1–7?

10. Have your own experiences with governing authorities led you to see them as generally just or unjust? Do you regularly pray for them (1 Tim. 2:1–3)?

Acts 24:1–9

11. Who represents the Sanhedrin before Governor Felix? What are the charges against Paul now? What description is made of the Christian faith by Tertullus?

12. What verse is missing from the printed text in this section? Look at the footnotes and examine the missing verse.

Acts 24:10–21

13. Still another speech by Paul! How does his opening compare with that of the orator Tertullus?

14. What does Paul deny? What does he admit? What's the reason he gives for coming to Jerusalem? Why the reference to "Jews from the province of Asia" (NIV)?

15. How does Paul summarize the "real issue" for which he's on trial?

Acts 24:22–27

16. In this section what more do you learn about Felix's knowledge of Christianity?

His family life? _____

His reaction to Paul's sermonizing? _____

His worldliness? _____

17. Paul spent two years under "house arrest" there. It might appear to be "dead time" for Paul. What good might have occurred in these otherwise empty years?

18. Have you had any such "dead times" in your life? How might God use them for your good?

Memory Challenge

Review what you have learned thus far.

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Imprisonment in Caesarea



CHRISTIANS IN PRISON

*Our fathers, chained in prisons dark, Were still in
heart and conscience free; How sweet would be their
children’s fate, If they, like them, could die for thee!*

FREDERICK W. FABER

Christians since the very beginning have been “persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Matt. 5:10). They have been arrested, imprisoned and executed because they took a stand against evil and made a faithful testimony for the Gospel of Jesus. Some of their stories are well-known. Sir Thomas More was imprisoned in the Tower of London and finally beheaded for daring to oppose the annulment of King Henry VIII’s marriage. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested by Hitler’s Gestapo and kept at Tegel Prison in Berlin for rescuing Jews. More recently, Pastor Yang Hua was imprisoned in China for his Christian witness. In varying degrees, all these men were able to make some written or oral testimony of faith while imprisoned. Countless other Christians had no such opportunity, though they are not forgotten by God!

The apostle Paul spent the final years of his life in prison because his witness about Jesus to the Gentiles had stirred the ire of his Jewish compatriots. The final portion of the Book of Acts tells the story of Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem, his lengthy imprisonment, and the extraordinary opportunities he had to give his testimony before crowds of common folk, governors, and kings. Among the fruits of that period were his “prison

letters” (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon) and his example of faithfulness under duress, something that doubtless has emboldened many over the centuries. His imprisonment in Caesarea and his testimony before Governor Felix are at the heart of this lesson.

A PLOT UNCOVERED

ACTS 23:12–22

In a nighttime vision (23:11), God had reassured Paul that he would have opportunity to make his testimony in Rome. It is striking to read that the very next morning (v. 12 — “when it was day”) his enemies met to decide how to kill him. God’s promise was about to be tested.

Paul was in the protective custody of the Romans at Fortress Antonia and out of reach of those enemies. How could they get to him? A plot was soon hatched against Paul’s life. Unnamed conspirators “went to the chief priests and elders and said... ‘Give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly... we are ready to kill him before he comes near’” (vv. 14–15). “More than forty” men (vv. 12–13) bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they’d done the deed. But keeping secret a plot involving so many people was difficult. The plan became known to “the son of Paul’s sister” (v. 16) — the only mention of any of Paul’s relatives in the New Testament. Richard Longenecker suggests that Paul may have stayed with this same sister and her family years earlier when studying under Gamaliel at Jerusalem (cf. 22:3).

As a Roman citizen held in custody, Paul could still receive visitors, and his nephew made haste to bring word of the plot to him. Perhaps fortified by the previous night’s vision, Paul immediately made a bold request to a nearby centurion: “Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him” (v. 17). The nephew was no child, but a grown man. The word translated “young man” (Greek *neanian*) is used of persons between age 24–40. By involving himself with a prisoner this way, the nephew may have incurred some risk. How would the Romans respond to him and his message?

The readiness of the centurion to go to the tribune, and the willingness of the tribune to hear the nephew out and then to take steps to protect Paul, are just two of many indications in the story that Paul was well treated by his Roman captors and was, in truth, under the special protection of God.

TRANSFER TO CAESAREA

ACTS 23:23–35

The tribune could not risk having a Roman citizen assassinated while in his custody, so he took steps at once to transfer Paul to provincial headquarters at Caesarea before the conspirators got wind of it. He arranged for a large protective escort consisting of 200 heavily armed soldiers, 200 more lightly armed “spearmen,” and 70 cavalry, and he provided “mounts” (v. 24) for Paul which likely meant a horse for him to ride and a pack animal for his baggage. The rare Greek word *dexiolaboi* translated “spearmen” appears only here in the New Testament and may, some guess, indicate not soldiers but additional mounts to carry the infantrymen for the sake of extra speed. Whether there were 470 or only 270 soldiers, this armed contingent would be more than enough to ensure Paul’s safety. The company set out under cover of darkness at nine o’clock that night.

Caesarea was nearly 60 miles from Jerusalem. It served as headquarters for Roman rule in the province of Judea. Antipatris (a military post) was about halfway between, marking the boundary where the population thinned out and the country was more open and less amenable to ambush, which may explain why the infantrymen returned to barracks from there.

Once in Caesarea Paul would appear before the procurator (governor), Antonius Felix, who had been appointed to his post by Emperor Claudius in AD 52. He and his brother Pallas were former slaves who had somehow been freed. Pallas became a favorite of the emperor and likely won Felix his position. Felix had married three royal women in succession. His current wife Drusilla was a Jewess, daughter of Herod Agrippa I. Born in AD 38, she was only 19 years old at this time.

The tribune also wrote a letter to Felix explaining this sudden development and seeking his determination in the case. In the letter, which reveals the tribune’s name as Claudius Lysias, he enlarged his own role (“I... rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen” — v. 27) and conveniently omitted that he nearly had Paul flogged! More importantly, he voiced the opinion that Paul was innocent of anything meriting punishment and saw it only as a question of Jewish religious law, echoing what Gallio had previously observed in Corinth (18:15).

At various points in the story there are echoes of the trial of Jesus (see Matt. 26:57–27:26; John 18:28–19:16). Both Paul and Jesus faced a hostile crowd of Jews. Both endured a hearing before the Sanhedrin. Jesus was also tried before a governor, but without the protection of Roman citizenship! Both were judged by the governor to be innocent. The question Felix asked about where Paul was from (v. 34) echoes Pilate’s inquiry about Jesus’ origins and his attempt to shift responsibility to Herod (Luke 23:6–7). Since Cilicia was far away, Felix could not easily consult another governor. “I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive” (v. 35). Until then, Paul was guarded in the palace once built by Herod the Great and now used by the Romans as a “praetorium,” the place for provincial business.

To this point Paul’s experiences with the Roman authorities bore out his teaching about governing authorities in Roman 13:1–7 (“rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad... he is God’s servant for your good”). Throughout Acts Paul is treated with fairness by these “secular” authorities. It was better treatment than he got from the religious authorities, who regarded him as dangerous.

TRIAL BEFORE FELIX: THE CHARGES

ACTS 24:1–9

“Five days” (v. 1) was enough time for a messenger to go from Caesarea to Jerusalem and inform the Sanhedrin, and for them to assemble a team of representatives who would then make the return journey. Sensible as that is, there is some difficulty in making sense of Paul’s later remark (v. 11) that “it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem.” Almost seven days had been spent there in his observance of purification rites. Now “five days” more have passed, presumably since his arrival in Caesarea. That already adds up to just under twelve days. How much time was taken up by his custody in Fortress Antonia, the making of the plot by the Jews, the informing by the nephew, and the nighttime journey? All these things, we gather, must have happened very quickly!

In the account of the trial before Felix, Luke gives almost equal space to the Jewish accusations, the defense Paul presents, and Felix’s response. The high priest Ananias himself came along to supervise the case personally. He also brought a “spokesman” (some versions read “lawyer”) named Tertullus who could phrase the trumped-up charges skillfully. Tertullus began with the kind of customary flattery (“through you we enjoy much peace... reforms are being made”) that all must have known to be laughably false in light of Felix’s history of corruption and violence toward the Jews. Just two years later he would be removed from office!

Tertullus then enumerated three charges. He accused Paul of being “a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world” (v. 5), language almost identical to words used by Emperor Claudius himself. Claudius had written a letter dated AD 41 to the city of Alexandria concerning riots there between Jews and Gentiles, stating that Jews must behave or he would be forced to regard them as “instigating a universal plague infecting the entire world.” The implied political threat to Rome’s civil order is like the charges brought earlier against Jesus (Luke 23:2, 5). Further, he called Paul “a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (which would mean that Paul was not a “real Jew” and that this Christian movement was not a “licit” religion deserving Rome’s protection). Finally, “he even tried to profane the temple” (v. 6), the one offense for which the Romans allowed the Jews to execute the offender.

Though the first and third charges were manifestly false, Felix would have to take note because these were constant concerns to the Romans, who prized civil order. Observant students will notice that v. 7 is missing in the present text. Some early manuscripts of Acts included a v. 7 in which Tertullus alleges that tribune Lysias “with the use of much force snatched [Paul] from our hands.” There is better evidence for the present reading, so the verse was omitted.

The “real issue” behind this whole proceeding, Paul asserts, is what he shouted as he stood before the Sanhedrin: “It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you.”



TRIAL BEFORE FELIX: PAUL’S DEFENSE

ACTS 24:10–21

Paul then makes his response, starting with a compliment more reserved and truer than the flattery of Tertullus: “for many years you have been a judge over this nation” (v. 10). True! Though Felix had been in office in Caesarea for only five years, his previous service in Samaria made the total twice that, and put him in a position to know the actual situation (cf. v. 22).

Paul addresses the three charges in turn. Was he a “plague” who “stirs up riots”? He responds, “they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd” (v. 12). “Not more than twelve days” (v. 11) is hardly time to foment anything significant!

Ringleader of a sect? He willingly admits his connection to “the Way” (v. 14 — “sect” is their word!), but explains in some detail its genuineness as an outgrowth of Judaism. Consider this, he says: “I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets” (v. 14). His faith, he asserts, is based on the same “hope in God... that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust” (v. 15). What’s more, he lives what he believes! “I always take pains to have a clear conscience” (v. 16). All of which is Paul’s way of affirming that Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism, not its antithesis.

Desecrate the temple? Not at all! “I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings” (v. 17). This is the only time in all of Acts that Paul is reported to mention the financial gift from the Gentiles that had so absorbed him. What’s more, he kept himself ceremonially “purified” while doing so (v. 18). Then he adds his own charge against the accusers: “some Jews from Asia [made the original accusation]... they ought to be here before you” (v. 19).

Why the reference to “Jews from the province of Asia”? They were the ones who claimed to have seen the supposed offense, the ones who had initially started the riot with this charge. Yet they were not here to face the accused! To bring charges and then absent oneself from the proceedings was a serious crime in Roman law, which imposed heavy penalties on those who abandoned their charges (in Latin called *destitutio*). The disappearance of the accusers often meant the withdrawal of the charges, Longenecker points out. Paul had put a serious dent in the case against him.

The “real issue” behind this whole proceeding, Paul asserts, is what he shouted as he stood before the Sanhedrin: “It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you” (v. 21 NIV). That was the issue that had left the Sanhedrin in an uproar and would eventually confound King Agrippa himself.

A PRIVATE AUDIENCE WITH THE GOVERNOR

ACTS 24:22–27

What was Felix to do with the case? After a decade in Palestine he was already well acquainted with the Christian movement. He could see clearly enough that the charges against Paul were entirely religious in nature, though dressed up by Tertullus as political sedition. The just response would have been to dismiss the case. Instead, for at least three reasons (two personal and one political), he postponed making a decision, keeping Paul in a loose custody that allowed visits by his friends.

The first personal reason was his own intense curiosity about Paul and his message, an interest that mirrored Herod Antipas’ fascination with John the Baptist (Mark 6:20) and later with Jesus (Luke 23:8–9). He arranged a private audience with Paul for himself and Drusilla “and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus” (v. 24). But Paul would not allow the interview to remain academic. He addressed moral issues and discussed “self-control and the coming judgment” in a way that made the oft-divorced and violence-prone governor “alarmed” (v. 25) and caused him to cut the session short. The second personal reason was his hope that Paul might offer him a bribe for his release. Felix must have imagined that Paul had financial connections, possibly because of his story of bringing an offering to the Jews from the Gentile believers.

Felix’s political reason for postponing a judgment was the genuine bind in which he found himself. He had been a poor leader, increasingly unpopular with the Jews because of his greed and cruelty. In an earlier outbreak of violence in Caesarea, Felix had dispatched troops that wound up killing many Jews. His troops went on to loot the homes of many of the wealthier Jews there. Freeing Paul would further anger them. At the same time, condemning Paul would make him look bad to his Roman superiors, for there was no real case against Paul. So he kept Paul under house arrest for two years, sending for him “often” for further conversations (v. 26) in hopes of extracting a bribe. It didn’t work.

After two years (AD 59), Felix was summoned to Rome to answer for the disturbances under his rule. Only the continued influence of his brother Pallas saved Felix from execution. Porcius Festus succeeded him. Festus was a vast improvement, likely very welcome to the Jews. He proved to be a wise ruler, though he would die in office only two years later.

Paul spent two tedious years under “house arrest” there, which looked for all the world like “dead time” for Paul. While we know little of what actually transpired during that time, Paul Maier surmises that Luke used the time to travel back to Jerusalem and investigate everything from the beginning (cf. Luke 1:3) about Jesus and the early years of the church as he talked with the apostles and, likely, Mary herself. He may have begun to sketch out the structure and scope of the great two-volume work we know as Luke-Acts (Longenecker).

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 25:1–27

Heavenly Father, as I read about Paul before his accusers, I remember fellow Christians who face injustice and hostility. Protect them! Fill them with Your Holy Spirit. Give them courage and words that witness faithfully of the love of Jesus Christ to their enemies. For His name's sake, I ask it. Amen.

Review

1. Share some ways that the trials of Paul mirrored the trial of Jesus.

-
2. How does Paul's story demonstrate how God brings good out of evil?

-
3. What have you learned in the past several lessons that has surprised you? Encouraged you?
-

Acts 25:1–12

4. Two years have passed since Paul was delivered to Caesarea. There is a new governor. While he gets acquainted with the Jewish leaders, Festus gets an urgent request from them. What is it? What's behind it?
-

5. By all accounts, Festus was a more decent man and ruler than Felix. According to verse 9 and 24:27, what do they have in common? How do you explain this shared desire?
-

6. While the trials of Jesus and Paul are similar in many ways, they differ dramatically in how each man answered the charges against him. Compare what you read in verse 8 and 24:10–21 with Matt. 27:12–14. What's the difference?
-

7. When you are wrongly accused by someone, do you normally respond with silence, reasoned explanations, or vehement denials? Why?
-

Acts 25:13–22

8. New players arrive on the scene. King Agrippa is one of the several "Herods" in the New Testament. Using your Bible's footnotes, a Bible dictionary, or the internet, record what you discover about him and Bernice.
-

9. What do Festus' comments reveal about his level of familiarity with Judaism or Christianity?
-

10. What do you suppose might be some of his motives as a new governor? Even today the motives of political leaders are hard to discern. Do you generally believe or disbelieve what they say? Why?
-
11. In 2012, the U. S. Supreme Court adjudicated a dispute between Hosanna Tabor Lutheran Church in Michigan and an employee, who had brought suit against the church. The court ruled in favor of the church, saying that the state could not interfere in the church's business. How does that situation mirror what Governor Festus says in vv. 18–19?
-
12. Agrippa says, "I would like to hear this man myself" (v. 22). His father (Agrippa I) is the Herod in Chapter 12 who executed James, but this Herod was only 16 years old at the time. What are some possible reasons he might want to hear from Paul?
-

Acts 25:23–27

13. What words does Luke use to describe the place where they met?
-
14. Compare the opinion of Festus (v. 25) with Pilate's considered verdict about Jesus (Luke 23:13–15). If both men are innocent, how do you understand the purposes of God in what happens to them?
-
15. What does Festus say is the reason he has arranged this hearing (vv. 26–27)? In light of verse 25, why can't he simply let Paul go?
-
16. When have you had to put your "fate" in the hands of an authority:
A tax audit? Asking boss for a raise or promotion? Seeking parent's blessing on a marriage? Bringing suit for damages to a court? Submitting to a doctor for life-threatening surgery? How did you feel as you approached that day?
-

Memory Challenge

ACTS 25:10–11 "To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar."

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The Appeal to Caesar



CHRISTIANITY IN A ROMAN WORLD

Christianity was born into the Roman Empire. The first emperor was Octavian, the man the Roman Senate designated “Caesar Augustus” (Luke 2:1) in 27 BC. His 41-year rule began a long period known as the Roman Peace (Pax Romana) which helped enable the spread of Christianity by making travel the safest it had ever been. The names of two other emperors appear in the New Testament. Emperor Claudius is mentioned twice in the Book of Acts (11:28 and 18:2), and the Sea of Galilee was alternately called the Sea of Tiberias after yet another emperor. The empire in the west lasted until the sack of Rome in the fifth century. Besides emperors, other Roman characters (centurions, governors, tribunes) pop up frequently in the Gospels and Acts, and attitudes about Roman rule (especially Roman taxes!) color several narratives.

Paul was a Roman citizen and played his “citizenship card” more than once in Acts. In this lesson, he virtually guarantees his appearance in Rome before Emperor Nero (AD 54–68) by making an “appeal to Caesar.” The appeal to Caesar was the right of every citizen to bypass lower authorities and go straight to the top for a verdict in one’s case. Only if a man was a murderer, pirate, or a bandit caught in the act was the appeal invalid. In each case, the emperor had to receive a written account of the charges so that he could make an informed decision.

In the story of Paul's trials, we see Jesus' words to his apostles in Matt. 10:18–19 coming true: "you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles... do not be anxious how you are to speak... what you are to say will be given to you in that hour." It is a story both fascinating and comforting to us who must now and then make an appearance before a boss, a military commander, or a judge!

PAUL APPEALS TO CAESAR

ACTS 25:1–12

Two years had passed since Paul was delivered to Caesarea. There was now a new governor, Porcius Festus. By all accounts, Festus was a more decent man and a more capable ruler than Felix. According to v. 9 and 24:27 they shared a desire to please the Jews, for differing reasons. Felix wanted to keep himself out of hot water after some administrative missteps. Festus was a neophyte, anxious to please his new subjects. The unsettled situation in Palestine made it important for Festus to bring together opposing factions. He took only three days to settle in to Caesarea before making the trip to Jerusalem to meet with Jewish leaders (v. 1).

While in Jerusalem Festus got an urgent request from them. Counting on the new governor's inexperience, they asked if Paul could be brought to Jerusalem for his formal hearing. Festus was likely unaware of their real motive — to ambush and kill Paul on the way there from Caesarea (23:12–15). But since the prisoner was already in Caesarea, Festus "unwittingly... overturned their plans" (Longenecker) by inviting them instead to come to Caesarea to press their charges.

The hearing was convened less than two weeks later (v. 6). After the two-year lapse, the Jews renewed their old charges, this time without

the presence of high priest Ananias, who had been deposed in the final days of Felix, and the smooth-talking lawyer Tertullus. Without Ananias and Tertullus, the accusers made a less compelling case. Again they offered no witnesses. Whereas Jesus had remained largely silent in the face of his accusers (Matt.27:12–14), Paul continued to mount a defense: "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense" (v. 8 — cf. his lengthy defense before Felix in 24:10–21).

Festus was at a loss about what to make of it all. The Jewish leaders plainly wanted the case moved to Jerusalem for trial, and as the new governor, he saw no reason why he could not grant their request. Turning to Paul, he asked, "Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem?" (v. 9). Paul, remembering clearly the plot to kill him two years earlier, wanted no part of a change of venue. He made bold use of his Roman citizenship once more: "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried... no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar" (vv. 10–11).

It might seem strange to some that Paul would prefer to appeal to Emperor Nero, who later became infamous as the persecutor of Christians, than to entrust his case to Festus, a fair-minded governor. But these early years of Nero's reign under the influence of Stoic philosopher Seneca gave little indication that Nero would make a violent turn against Christians later on. Festus was probably only too willing to have this way out of a sticky political mess, so he consented: "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go" (v. 12). Now the only problem remaining for Festus was what to write in his report to the imperial court in Rome, a document required by law.

“I WOULD LIKE TO HEAR THE MAN MYSELF”

ACTS 25:13–22

As if in answer to his dilemma, two new players arrived on the scene: “Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus” (v. 13). King Herod Agrippa II is one of a string of “Herods” in the New Testament. His father is the Herod who had earlier executed the Apostle James (12:1), but Agrippa II was only a lad of 17 when his father died and had spent much of his early life in Rome, brought up in the court of Emperor Claudius. Though Bernice was his younger sister, rumors of an incestuous relationship between them swirled in Rome and Palestine. This Agrippa ruled a small territory — Galilee and Perea — and he well knew that even this was only by the permission of the Romans. As ruler of the neighboring area north of Judea, he came to pay his respects to the new governor.

During their lengthy stay (“many days” v. 14), there was ample opportunity for Festus to share this unusual case with them. Taking care to avoid any missteps, Festus explained that he had acted according to good Roman practice by bringing the accused man and his accusers together. This he did “with no delay” (v. 17). To his surprise, the case seemed to turn on matters “about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive” (v. 19). To the new governor, this all was incomprehensible, leaving him “at a loss how to investigate these questions” (v. 20). Agrippa, on the other hand, was “looked upon by Rome as an authority on the Jewish religion” (Longenecker). For the past nine years he had the right of appointing high priests in Jerusalem and of exercising supervision of the temple. He knew something of their theology and politics! “I would like to hear the man myself,” enthused Agrippa (v. 22). Festus gladly agreed to arrange it. Maybe Agrippa would help him understand the issues and give him something intelligent to write to Nero as a case summary (vv. 26–27).

BROUGHT BEFORE THE KING

ACTS 25:23–27

The audience before Agrippa was to be the fifth opportunity for Paul to make his testimony “before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (9:15), as Jesus had long ago told Ananias. The others, as described in earlier lessons, were:

Before the Jews at the Temple - 21:37–22:31

Before the Sanhedrin - 22:30–23:10

Before Governor Felix - 24:1–21

Before Governor Festus - 25:6–12.

For Luke this one is evidently the most important of the five, being the longest and most carefully constructed, incorporating for a third time the story of his conversion (see Chapters 9 and 22) and a summary of the Gospel as well.

The setting is magnificent. Instead of meeting in a courtroom or a tribunal, this gathering takes place in an “audience hall” with dignitaries who come “with great pomp” (v. 23). William Barclay observes, “There is no more dramatic scene in all the New Testament. It was with pomp that Agrippa and Bernice had come. They would have on their purple robes of royalty and the gold circlet of the crown on their brows... Festus had donned the scarlet robe which a governor wore...” Influential Jews and ranks of Roman legionaries were doubtless present as well. It was an impressive scene, into the center of which was brought the diminutive figure of Paul with his hands in chains.

Festus begins the proceedings with an explanation of why they are assembled, turning the dignitaries’ attention to Paul, “You see this man” (v. 24). Interestingly, Pilate had said something similar when Jesus, arrayed in his crown of thorns and purple robe, came and stood before the crowd in Jerusalem: “Behold the man!” (John 19:5). Now Festus publicly reveals his own conclusion about the proceedings, “I found that he had done nothing deserving death,” which parallels Pilate’s verdict on

Jesus, “I find no guilt in him” (John 19:6). So why are we here? He goes on to explain that Paul has “appealed to the emperor” (v. 25), removing the option of a simple release. The Greek word used for “emperor” is *sebaston*, the equivalent of the Latin title “Augustus,” found only in this chapter in the New Testament (vv. 21 and 25).

The reason he has called them together, accordingly, is a simple one. “I have brought him before you... so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write [to Nero]. For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him” (vv. 26–27). More than unreasonable it would be! To fail to send such a document would be a dereliction of duty and land Festus in trouble with his superiors. The stage is set for Paul’s memorable defense.

POSTSCRIPT — ADJUDICATING RELIGIOUS MATTERS

The role of the civil authorities to adjudicate religious matters is a question at least as old as the Book of Acts. The Roman authorities said on more than one occasion, in effect, “This is a matter of your religious convictions. Decide this among yourselves.” Making the question more complex was the fact that some religions, including Judaism, were officially tolerated while others were not. This explains why Paul portrayed himself and his participation in “the Way” as a legitimate development within Judaism.

The relationship of government and religion remains a lively question in the United States, where the first amendment reads, “Congress shall make no law

regarding an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” In our day when public approval or even tolerance of religious expression appears to be eroding, the relationship between government and religion is growing more crucial. Shall religious groups be taxed? Shall people holding office or running businesses be required to act contrary to their religious convictions, and if so, under what circumstances? Shall the courts settle religious disputes?

The LCMS made national news in 2012 when one of its internal disputes came before the U. S. Supreme Court. A teacher at Hosanna Tabor Lutheran School in Redford, Michigan, had been terminated for cause in 2004. The employee sued the church, and the EEOC initially ruled in her favor. The church argued that she was a “minister of religion” and her termination fell within their religious prerogatives under the first amendment. The school had the right to decide employment matters without interference from the courts, they said. In a unanimous decision written by Chief Justice John Roberts, the court held that the employee was a minister for the purposes of the Civil Rights Act’s “ministerial exception,” dismissing her lawsuit and claims for damages.

Paul’s use of his citizenship rights is still instructive for us who live as citizens under God’s “left hand” kingdom called government. Bringing a case before the Supreme Court is as close as we Americans get to saying, “I appeal to Caesar!”

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 26:1-32

Lord God, bless this study. Let me learn from Paul to make the most of the opportunities You give me to testify to the grace of Jesus Christ, whether in large or small settings. I ask it for His glory's sake. Amen.

Review

1. What are some new things you have learned about Roman rule and Roman citizenship thus far in Acts?

2. What challenges did Festus face as he assumed the role as Judea's governor?

Acts 26:1-11

3. Paul begins by saying, "I consider myself fortunate that it is before you... I am going to make my defense" (v. 2). What reason does Paul give for this?

4. Why do you think Paul reviewed his Jewish "track record"? Compare what he says in Gal. 1:11-17 — why does he rehearse it there?

5. What events from your own life story would you employ in making a testimony of your faith?

6. For Paul, what's "the heart of the matter"? His opponents never mention this in their charges. Why not?

Acts 26:12-23

7. Re-read Paul's defense before Felix in 24:10-21. What is different about his speech here before Agrippa?

8. Is Paul trying to convince Agrippa of his innocence or is he trying to assert the truth of Christianity's claims?

9. How would you summarize the Gospel message he preaches in vv. 18-23?

10. Which of the images from v. 18 best describes your spiritual journey?

- a) Having my eyes opened
- b) Turning from darkness to light
- c) Turning from Satan's power to God

11. “The prophets and Moses” in v. 22 is a Jewish way of describing the Holy Scriptures. How does it compare with Jesus’ summary in Luke 24:44?

12. What’s the difference, if any, between Paul’s mission and ours? How specifically am I living out this mission? When’s the last time you approached someone with the intent of bearing witness to Jesus Christ?

Acts 26:24–32

13. What’s the reaction of Governor Festus? Compare the reaction to Jesus in Mark 3:21 and John 10:20.

14. What’s King Agrippa’s response to Paul’s insistent question (v. 27)?

15. How would you characterize the world’s responses to the Gospel today? What kind of responses have you personally gotten when extending invitations to hear the Gospel or come to church?

Memory Challenge

ACTS 26:19–20 “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.”

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Testimony Before the King



MEMORABLE SPEECHES

Even those who didn't care much for the recitation of dates, places, and battles of high school history class can resonate to the inspiring cadences and images of history's great speeches. Our collective memory as Americans summons Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, and John F. Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you" inaugural. Our neighbors in Great Britain might cite William Wilberforce's powerful oration against the slave trade in 1789 or Churchill's "We shall fight on the beaches" before the House of Commons in 1940.

Just as soaring, and more dramatic, are speeches made before rulers who held the speaker's life in their hands. Martin Luther's life and the whole Reformation movement were at stake when he delivered his bold "Here I stand!" speech before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms in 1521. Many in that room wanted him dead. It was the same for Jesus as He stood before Caiaphas on trial for His life. His fate (and our rescue) hung in the balance that night! He was mostly silent, but the few words He spoke, "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming..." (Matt. 26:64), caused the high priest to tear his robes and say, "He deserves death!"

The Book of Acts has allowed us to listen in as Paul stood before several audiences fighting for his life and bearing witness to the name of Jesus. As it turned out, his words to the Roman governors Felix and Festus kept him alive and guaranteed an audience with the king and then Emperor Nero himself. In this lesson we will stand among the throng and watch him speak before King Agrippa. His clear, courageous words are worth our study and prayerful reflection.

PAUL'S JEWISH CREDENTIALS AND SHAMEFUL PAST

ACTS 26:1-11

For two long, bleak years in prison at Caesarea, Paul had waited for such an opportunity: a knowledgeable judge, and a not inherently antagonistic audience before whom he could make his defense and proclaim his message. At long last the summons came, right on the heels of the arrival of King Agrippa and Bernice. Robert Smith aptly sets the stage: “The procurator was the chairman, the king the honored guest, and Paul the star performer.” With preliminaries out of the way, King Agrippa turned to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself” (v. 1).

Paul, still wearing his prisoner’s chains (see v. 29) and probably aware that Agrippa’s father had executed the Apostle James years before, begins politely, “I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense” (v. 2). Paul knows Agrippa’s reputation as a student of Judaism: “You are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews” (v. 3). Since Festus has already said publicly that he was not guilty of a capital crime, Paul chooses to focus all his attention on the dispute over Jewish tradition and theology. Instead of a reasoned defense against a trio of Jewish charges (as before Felix in 24:10–21), Paul launches into an address that sounds more like a sermon, a testimony of faith which will invite his listeners to examine their personal convictions. Agrippa must have leaned forward in anticipation.

First, he must establish his credentials. Not only is he a Jew, Paul reminds the king, but he is a member of “the strictest party of our religion,” a Pharisee. The Pharisees, everyone knew, were the “resurrection party.” He

introduces that issue by saying, “my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers” (v. 6). The key word for Paul is HOPE. That hope is not his alone, nor even the Pharisees’ alone. “Our twelve tribes hope to attain [this promise]” (v. 7). Mention of the twelve tribes is itself a hopeful statement, since the northern tribes had long ago disappeared into exile at the destruction of Samaria in 721 BC. Since that day, Israelites looked for the day when God would gather the lost tribes and restore all the sons of Jacob. Jesus began doing that when He appointed twelve apostles.

“Isn’t it strange,” Paul seems to be asking the king, “that I am the most Jewish of Jews, with the most scriptural of promises in which I hope, and here I stand accused... by Jews!” (v. 7). In what promise does he hope? He says it plainly: “Why is it thought incredible by any one of you that God raises the dead?” (v. 8). As he sees it, Paul is not on trial. God’s promise of the resurrection, indeed the whole of the Gospel, is on trial! That was the heart of the matter for him, though the Jews did not bring it as a charge because it would not lead to a Roman conviction.

How did he come to this hope in the resurrection? He begins to tell Agrippa his own story, starting with his fervent opposition to the name of Jesus of Nazareth (v. 9). Paul reviews his role as a persecutor to make clear that, in answer to his Jewish critics, he did not set out to destroy their religion, but to defend it. His review of his past in Gal. 1:11–17 had a different purpose — to make clear that he had not invented the Gospel he now preached. It was not from man (even from the original apostles in Jerusalem) but from God.

A HEAVENLY VISION OBEYED

ACTS 26:12–23

What changed him? In verse 12 he begins the story of his conversion. This is now the third telling of this important episode in Acts, which for Paul was the foundation of his apostleship and everything else he did. The first telling (in Chapter 9) was Luke’s rendering for his readers. The second (in Chapter 22) was Paul’s version for the Jews in Jerusalem. This one is for the Gentiles in Caesarea.

Of special interest in this third telling is which details are included and which are excluded. Unique to this account are the words of Jesus, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (v. 14). A young, untrained ox often tried to kick its way out of a yoke. The ploughman would hold a long, pointed goad to poke the ox each time it kicked. It soon learned not to! In the Greek world, it was not simply a farmer’s bit of wisdom. “Kicking against the goads” was a well-known expression for opposition to a deity. Such “kicking” describes attempted, but futile, resistance to the will of God. His Gentile listeners that day understood what Paul meant. He had to learn submission to a new master, gain a new understanding of the work of God.

Another unique detail is the expansion of the Lord’s command that day: “Rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose... as a witness... [to] the Gentiles — to whom I am sending you” (vv. 16–17) recalls the commissioning of the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah. “Stand on your feet, and I will speak with you,” God said to Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:1). “To all to whom I send you, you shall go,” He said to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:7). Jesus was making Paul part of His prophetic witness.

Omitted in this telling is the mention of Ananias, his own blindness, and his baptism. His Gentile audience did not need to know about the devout

Jewish faith of Ananias. Mention of his blindness and subsequent healing made unnecessarily complicated a story he hoped would simply underline the divine commission Christ gave him. Nor would there be opportunity to baptize.

Instead he dwells on the commission given him by the risen Christ: “I am sending you to open their eyes...” (v. 17). The Greek verb for “sending” is *apostelloo*, the same root word behind the English “apostle.” An emissary of the Sanhedrin was technically known as an *apostolos* of the Sanhedrin. Paul had started as the “apostle” of the Sanhedrin and wound up as an “apostle” of Jesus Christ. Even as he had once been blinded on the Damascus road, symbolic of his blindness to the identity of Jesus Christ, now His apostolic mission to the Gentiles was to help them see again, “to open their eyes” so that they might “turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (v. 18). That repentant turning would bring them two things — the “forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified.” His assignment mirrors that given to God’s Servant in Isaiah: “I will give you as... a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind” (Is. 42:6–7). The mission of God’s Servant Jesus is continued by His servant Paul.

The heavenly vision that day is what launched Paul into his missionary work, he explains, first to Jews and then to Gentiles, “that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance” (v. 20). It was his obedience to the heavenly vision that stirred Jewish hostility, this obedience that even now propels him to “stand here testifying both to small and great” (v. 22).

The Gospel message he shares with the king is utterly simple: “that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and

to the Gentiles” (v. 23). That there would be a Messiah (Christ) had been the Jewish hope for centuries. That the Messiah would suffer a redemptive death and rise again was the distinctive message of Christianity, even though Paul insisted that he was “saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass” (v. 22).

“The prophets and Moses” is a Jewish way of describing the Holy Scriptures. A fuller expression, encompassing the three divisions of Scripture, would be the one Jesus used with the Emmaus disciples: “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). The Book of Acts is replete with examples of how Peter and then Paul cited the Old Testament to undergird their messages.

“YOU ARE OUT OF YOUR MIND!”

ACTS 26:24-32

As we read, we realize the irony of this whole scene. The man in chains is really in charge! It is not Paul, but King Agrippa, Governor Festus, and the whole listening assembly who are actually “on trial” before God! Will they or won’t they believe what they are hearing?

Governor Festus cannot bear it. He blurts out, “Paul, you are out of your mind!” Jesus’ family had voiced the same astonished reaction about Him: “He is out of his mind” (Mark 3:21). The unbelieving Jews had expanded that assessment: “He has a demon, and is insane!” (John 10:20). Paul had heard it all before. This message of a suffering Messiah, he well knew, was “folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23), and the notion of resurrection the last straw for the mockers he met in Athens (Acts 17:32). Undaunted by the governor’s outburst, he responded firmly but politely: “I am not

out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words” (v. 25). Then turning to face the king, he added, “For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly... none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?” (vv. 26–27).

The “hour of decision” has arrived. What began as a defense has become a powerful sermon, and Paul the revival preacher has put the king on the “anxious bench”! He appeals to the king as a fellow Jew, “I know that you believe!” The atmosphere is electric. We can imagine the king’s knuckles tightening on his chair:

“In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” (v. 28). The KJV’s fascinating, though inaccurate, rendering is “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian”! The king is trapped. He cannot easily deny the prophets, nor can he openly support Paul against the priestly hierarchy.

Paul’s answer to the king is both evangelistic and humorous: “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am.” Then, with a smile, “except for these chains!” (v. 29).

Suddenly it is over. The regally-robed rulers rise. The meeting is adjourned. The great speech has found its mark. In the hallway, all agree that Paul has done “nothing to deserve death or imprisonment” (v. 31). Agrippa voices the final verdict on Christianity in the Book of Acts: “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar” (v. 32). That appeal will now take Paul to Rome.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 27:1-44

Lord God, bless and direct the study I now undertake. Remind me that even the most frightening journeys I must take are attended by Your gracious care and accomplish Your purpose for me. In that let me take comfort and courage! For Jesus' sake, I ask it. Amen.

Review

1. Review the ways in which here and elsewhere Paul has made clear that Christianity is not a “new” religion opposed to Judaism but its fulfillment.

2. How does Paul tailor his conversion story to fit his Gentile audience?

Acts 27:1-8

3. Have you ever been on a long sea voyage? What's the worst storm you ever weathered, on land or sea?
-
4. “We” (v. 1) indicates that Luke now rejoins Paul after his imprisonment in Caesarea. Also in the company is Aristarchus. What do we know of him from 19:29 and Col. 4:10?
-
5. Once again we meet a “good” centurion (Julius). Why do you suppose that he demonstrated kindness to Paul?
-
6. Consult a map of the Mediterranean and see if you can locate Cyprus, Myra, Cnidus, and Fair Havens. What hints do you read in these verses about coming troubles on the voyage?
-

Acts 27:9-12

7. “The Fast” was connected with Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement). Look up “the date of Yom Kippur” or “the Jewish calendar” in Bible notes or on the internet. Within a month or so, what time of year is it?
-
8. How far is the anticipated voyage from Fair Havens to Phoenix? (see a map) _____
 9. If you had been the ship's owner or pilot, how would you have reacted to Paul's warning?
-

Acts 27:13-26

10. “Northeaster” was a wind that drove them straight away from the safe harbor in Phoenix. What steps do the sailors take to adjust to the storm's ferocity?
-

11. Another great “voyage and storm” story in the Bible is the story of Jonah. Review it in Jonah 1. Compare and contrast the two stories in what they say about:

the location and direction of the voyage _____

the danger _____

the sailors’ remedies/ loss of all control _____

the main characters’ motives _____

the role of prayer (who prays? who doesn’t?) _____

the result _____

12. What was the substance of the angel’s message to Paul? How is it connected with the predominant theme in Acts?

13. In nautical terms, how would you describe your life at present?

a) Sailing straight for port under clear skies

b) Becalmed — making no forward progress

c) Struggling against a persistent headwind

d) In the midst of a storm — fearful of uncertain future

e) Ship run aground — battered by the waves

Acts 27:27–38

14. “The sailors” (v. 27) are one of three identifiable groups on the ship, along with soldiers and prisoners. What course of action do they undertake to save themselves?

15. Compare vv. 31–32 with v. 11. Why do you suppose the soldiers act on Paul’s directive to cut the boat loose?

16. Have you ever been tempted to “bail out” of a crisis and slip away in a “lifeboat”? If you did, what happened?

17. What Christ-like act does Paul perform in v. 35? What’s the impact on others?

18. Why do you suppose the number of passengers (276) is mentioned?

Acts 27:39–44

19. Why are the soldiers planning to kill the prisoners (recall Acts 12:18–19 and 16:27)? Who makes the decision to spare them? Why?

20. Consider the actions of Paul in this storm (sensible warnings, encouragement, a meal and prayer of thanks). How does his example hearten you in the storms you face just now?

Memory Challenge

Use this week to review what you have memorized

SETTING SAIL WITH JULIUS – ACTS 27:1–8	177
PAUL’S WISE ADVICE – ACTS 27:9–12	178
THE STORM – ACTS 27:13–26	178
THE SAILORS’ PLOT AND A HOPEFUL MEAL ACTS 27:27–38	179
THE SHIPWRECK – ACTS 27:39–44	180
PERSONAL APPLICATION – ACTS 28:1–31	181

Storm and Shipwreck



STORM STORIES

Storm stories are exciting, whether they are literary fiction or fact. William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* tells of a storm and shipwreck conjured up by the sorcerer Prospero. Sebastian Junger’s *The Perfect Storm*, which recounts an actual 1991 October storm off the coast of Nova Scotia, was made into a movie. The monster hurricane called “Katrina” that struck the Gulf Coast in 2005 killed more than 1,800 people and caused \$100 billion in property damage. It is still talked about by those who lived through it and others who joined the massive cleanup afterward.

Almost everyone has a “storm story” to tell. You have one, don’t you? It may be the remembrance of riding out a tornado in a storm cellar in Kansas or being pulled from a submerged vehicle in a flash flood in Texas. This author lived through a snow and ice storm in December 2008 that paralyzed the Pacific Northwest and cancelled Christmas services that year. Our reminiscences are often woven through with the realization of God’s mysterious working. The insurance industry even calls such things “acts of God.”

The Bible records the granddaddy of all storms, the Flood, which destroyed everyone except Noah’s family and an ark full of animals. It also recounts a sudden, violent storm that forced rebellious Jonah to make a mid-course correction to Nineveh. Many of us remember hearing

in Sunday school the story of the great storm on the Sea of Galilee with Jesus asleep on a cushion, the frantic cries of the disciples, and the majestic “Peace! Be still!” (Mark 4:35–41) that brought a great calm.

Paul’s voyage to Rome in AD 60 was attended by a great storm, and he and all the passengers survived the ensuing shipwreck. Like all the other Bible stories of storms, this one too reminds us of God’s presence and purposes, even when the wild winds blow and things look hopeless.

SETTING SAIL WITH JULIUS

ACTS 27:1–8

“We” (v. 1) indicates that Luke has now rejoined Paul after his imprisonment in Caesarea and accompanies him on the trip. Also in the company is Aristarchus, a traveling companion from Macedonia who was with Paul earlier in Ephesus (19:29) and will later be called a “fellow prisoner” in Rome (Col. 4:10). William Barclay thinks the only way Aristarchus could have accompanied Paul was by enrolling as his servant, but this seems unnecessary in light of the many privileges Paul enjoyed in spite of his prisoner status.

This whole chapter fascinates with its detail! Richard Longenecker observes that Luke’s account of Paul’s voyage to Rome “stands out as one of the most vivid pieces of descriptive writing in the whole Bible.” Ernst Haenchen shares the view of many when he says that Luke “certainly possessed a journal of this voyage,” which explains the precise description of first-century seamanship and the almost tangible feel of the weather conditions.

Once again we meet a “good” centurion, this one named Julius, a commander stationed in Syria with the so-called Augustan Cohort (cf. 10:1). Among the kindnesses he extends to Paul is permission for shore leave to visit fellow Christians in Sidon (v. 3). It is possible that, given Paul’s long imprisonment in Caesarea, Roman officers stationed in or near Judea had shared his story with one another, and that could explain the respectful treatment they afforded him.

The voyage’s initial going was slow because of unfavorable winds (vv. 4, 7). At Myra the soldiers and prisoners changed ships and boarded an Alexandrian vessel bound for Rome — a grain ship with a cargo of corn or wheat (see v. 38). Egypt was the breadbasket of Rome, and a steady stream of ships made the circuit from Rome to Alexandria and back. These vessels were generally 140 feet long and 35 feet wide. They bore a single mast with great square sail, the drawback of which was an inability to “tack” into the wind. Instead of a regular single rudder, the grain ships had two great oars on either side of the stern.

Leaving Myra, the grain ship moved slowly along the peninsula to Cnidus, the last port of call before ships headed west across the wider Aegean to Greece. But the prevailing winds pushed the ship off course. Instead of west to Greece, they ran southwest toward Crete, the 160-mile long island toward the middle of the Great Sea. The ship had lost valuable time, and it was obvious there was no hope of reaching Italy before winter. They stopped at Fair Havens, which had a less-than-adequate harbor (see v. 12). Spend the winter here or push on a bit further?

PAUL'S WISE ADVICE

ACTS 27:9-12

Paul may have been only a prisoner, but he was one of more experienced passengers aboard. Already he had been “shipwrecked” three times and adrift at sea a night and a day (2 Cor. 11:25). This voyage, Paul knew, was going to be dangerous at best because “the Fast was already over” (v. 9). “The Fast” was connected with Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement or “Day of Fasting”), which that year fell in early October. Any voyage undertaken after September 15, the Romans liked to say, was doubtful; after November 11, it was suicidal! That’s why the sea was “closed to shipping” (Latin *mare clausum*) from November 10 to March 10.

When he saw that the leaders were contemplating going further west, Paul took Julius, the pilot, and the owner of the ship (v. 11) aside and said, “Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives” (v. 10). It was not a revelation from God but ordinary prudence that made him say it. But they declined his advice and decided to push on, if possible, to Phoenix, a larger town with a satisfactory harbor 40 miles to the west, there to winter over. It was a fateful decision.

THE STORM

ACTS 27:13-26

The window of opportunity appeared open for a time. There was a gentle south wind and hopes for smooth sailing, so they “weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore” (v. 13). But at Cape Matala, where the shore of Crete turns suddenly north, they were soon struck by “a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster” (v. 14). The grain ship, with its single mast and one large square sail, had no way to tack into the wind. Straight away from the safe harbor of Phoenix it drove them. Rather than risking damaging the ship by fighting the wind, they “gave way to it,” drifting some 24 miles southwest to a small island called Cauda. There they had a brief respite on the island’s lee side — time enough to pull aboard the ship’s dinghy which was normally towed aft, then lash the ship with ropes to make it more secure against the waves.

Too soon the respite ended and the northeaster blew them into open, raging ocean again. Now the sailors feared that unless the storm abated, they would be blown into “the Syrtis” (v. 17), the vast, sandy shallows north of Libya where ships were caught on shoals and broken apart by waves, too far from shore for rescue. Desperate to avoid that fate, they “began the next day to jettison the cargo” (v. 18). Thick clouds obscured both sun and stars, making any navigation impossible. When it went on for days on end, the crew abandoned hope (v. 20).

The sailors’ desperation in the face of a great storm is very like what is described in the book of Jonah (see Jonah 1:4ff.). Some interesting parallels and contrasts between the two stories include the following:

JONAH'S VOYAGE

Sailed west on the Mediterranean
Jonah fleeing from God
A “great wind... a mighty tempest”
Fear — crew hurled cargo into the sea
Sailors pray, but not Jonah
Crew casts lots to discover God's will
Jonah the source of danger
Storm quieted, ship rescued
All lived to tell the tale
God's message delivered to Nineveh

PAUL'S VOYAGE

Sailed west on the Mediterranean
Paul obedient to God
“A tempestuous wind...the northeaster”
Fear — crew jettisoned cargo
Sailors and Paul both pray
God reveals will to Paul through vision
Paul a source of hope and help
Storm continued, ship wrecked
All lived to tell the tale
God's message delivered to Rome

Unlike rebellious Jonah, Paul remained in close communion with God, though doubtless he shared the crew's fear. In the midst of the storm's fury, there came to him yet another vision, not unlike the heartening message he received in Corinth (18:9–10). In it an angel of God said, “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you” (v. 24). Not even a great storm will prevent the fulfillment of God's plan to bring His Gospel to Rome, a city at “the end of the earth” (1:8).

THE SAILORS' PLOT AND A HOPEFUL MEAL

ACTS 27:27–38

The mighty storm went on and on as they were driven across “the Adriatic Sea” (v. 27). Lest we suppose they were east of Italy in what we today call the “Adriatic,” it is well to point out that the Greek actually reads “Adrian” (so the KJV translates it!). According to ancient writers Strabo and Josephus, this term denotes a different part of the Mediterranean far to the south between Greece, Italy, and Africa.

On the “fourteenth night” the sailors determined they were nearing land, probably hearing the pounding of the surf on a nearby shore. Depth soundings confirmed increasingly shallow water. To keep the ship from being wrecked, they dropped four anchors from the stern and “prayed for day to come” (v. 29). Richard Longenecker describes what happens next: “Contrary to the best tradition of the sea, the sailors schemed to save themselves by lowering the lifeboat (cf. vv. 16–17) under cover of lowering some more anchors from the bow.” But Paul saw through this ruse and warned Julius and the soldiers. To try to make shore in the morning without a crew would be disastrous. Though Julius had not heeded Paul earlier, this time he ordered his men to cut the dinghy's lines and let it fall away. Paul had earned a hearing by demonstrating his nautical wisdom, and his vision had doubtless encouraged many of them.

There was little to do but wait till morning and then make a run for the beach — a risky proposition. “As day was about to dawn” (v. 33), Paul demonstrated his leadership by urging the men to have a meal. The violence of the storm had heretofore prevented the preparation of regular meals. Paul himself led the way by taking some bread, “and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat” (v. 35). It is a Christ-like act (see Luke 9:16, 22:19, and 24:30–31), with the result that “all were encouraged” (v. 36). The subsequent mention of the number of passengers at this point may reflect the necessity of knowing how many were to be fed. Did Luke himself help with the distribution?

Strengthened by the food, they undertook one last task before the risky journey ashore: “they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea” (v. 38).

They were as ready as they could be for whatever daylight would bring.

THE SHIPWRECK

ACTS 27:39–44

In the full light of morning it was clear they were far off course. “They did not recognize the land” (v. 39), but at least there was a bay with a beach where they hoped they might run the ship ashore. In short order they cast off the anchors that held them through the night, loosened the rudders, and hoisted the sail. The freed ship began to move toward the beach, but then with a grinding of timbers “they ran the vessel aground” (v. 41) on a hidden reef. With the bow pinned there and the breakers smashing into the stern, the ship was doomed.

Now the only option was “every man for himself” through the pounding surf to shore, if possible. The soldiers charged with minding the prisoners decided they must kill them “lest any should swim away and escape” (v. 42), which would leave the soldiers liable to be executed for failure in their duty (recall 12:18–19 and 16:27). Once more, the kindness of the centurion saved Paul and the rest. Julius ordered all the swimmers to jump in and head for the beach and those remaining to grasp whatever might float and make for the beach.

“So it was that all were brought safely to land” (v. 44). The angel’s message came true. God’s promised help proved more powerful than the storm. All would have quite a story to tell!

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 28:1-31

Gracious God, as I read about Paul's arrival in Rome, I remember how often You have brought me safely to my destinations. Thank You, Lord! Fill me with confidence that Your purpose for my life will be realized, and show me what You want me to say and do. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Review

1. Review the similarities and differences between the voyages of Jonah and Paul.

2. If you were Paul reflecting on the experience of the storm and shipwreck, how would you say God helped during that long ordeal?

Acts 28:1-10

3. Before Paul arrives at Rome, there are yet more kindnesses by Gentiles! What do they do for him?

4. Compare Paul's experience in vv. 3-6 with 14:11-18. What do the islanders conclude? Why?

5. In light of the fact that God wanted Paul to get to Rome, why do you think He allowed the shipwreck and the snakebite? (Look at what Paul later wrote in Phil. 1:12-13.)

6. Is there some "disaster" in your life that has become a story of God's grace?

Acts 28:11-16

7. "After three months" — sailing season began again in early March. How did they find another ship? What did it have in common with their wrecked vessel?

8. What additional care do Paul and companions experience at Puteoli?

9. Once in Rome, what arrangement was made for Paul's continued imprisonment?

10. If you were to be imprisoned, what three items would you want to have with you there?

Acts 28:17–31

11. What's the difference between "the brothers" in v. 15, "the Jews" in v. 17, and "my brothers" in v. 17?

12. What do these Jews know, and what don't they know about Paul and the Christian movement?

13. What was the substance of Paul's meeting with them? How did the result compare with his experience on his earlier mission journeys?

14. Compare Paul's verdict in vv. 25–28 about their response with the explanation Jesus gives his disciples in Matt. 13:11–17. What passage do both quote? How does it explain the difficulty the Jews had in understanding and accepting the Gospel?

15. What has happened to verse 29? Consult text notes and footnotes in your Bible.

16. It is probable that Paul was released from imprisonment in AD 62 and, some think, went on a mission to Spain thereafter. He was likely imprisoned again and finally executed by Nero in AD 67. If so, why does Luke end the story here?

17. In what way would you personally like to contribute to a "Chapter 29" or even to a next book entitled "The Acts of the Believers Today"?

Memory Challenge

ACTS 28:30–31 "He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

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The Prisoner Preaches in Rome



FINDING YOUR NICHE

A “niche,” says the dictionary, is “a place, employment, status, or activity for which a person or thing is best fitted.” One of the tasks that faces every one of us is finding the niche for which God created and gifted us. A German boy named Johann Sebastian Bach found his niche as a musician whose music served as a vehicle of God’s Word. An Albanian girl named Agnes Bojaxhiu found her niche as a Roman Catholic nun named Mother Teresa who served the poorest of the poor in India. An American teenager named Joni Eareckson, whose neck was broken in a swimming accident, eventually found her niche as a writer, artist, and inspirational speaker. Have you found your niche?

One of the story lines in Acts is how Saul of Tarsus found his niche. Paul “saw the light” on the Damascus Road, met the Risen Lord and learned that he was to be a “chosen instrument” to carry the name of Jesus before the Gentiles. Saul got a new name, Paul, and a new life. Gifted with Roman citizenship, a keen intellect and a vast knowledge of the Scriptures, his encounter with Jesus propelled him into his niche in the Kingdom as a missionary to the Gentiles. The Book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome. Though he is a prisoner, he is happily doing what God made him to do — welcoming all who came to visit and “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness” (28:31). He was just where God wanted him to be!

SAFELY ASHORE ON MALTA

ACTS 28:1-10

All 276 men aboard the ill-fated cargo ship had made it safely to shore. Thankfully, it was no deserted island. They were on Malta (the name means “place of refuge”!), a municipality with its own governor installed by Caesar Augustus. The islanders had seen the sailors’ distress and were there to welcome those who swam or drifted ashore. The ESV calls them “native people” (v. 2), a good rendering of the Greek *barbaroi*, a name Greeks gave any people who were not Greek-speaking. These people were Phoenician in ancestry and thoroughly Romanized, having some retired Roman army veterans in the population’s mix. Far from acting like “barbarians,” they showed unusual kindness to Paul and the other shipwreck survivors. They offered a warm welcome and built a warm fire against the cold drizzle falling on that November day. Here we see another winsome quality in Paul. He had a servant heart, and he was not above doing whatever menial task lay at hand, which just then happened to be gathering a bundle of sticks for the fire (v. 3).

Then came another unexpected turn in the story. “A viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand.” Though today there are no poisonous snakes on Malta, this snake and its venomous bite were viewed with dread by the islanders, who knew well enough what it could do. Immediately they rendered their verdict: “No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live” (v. 4). But Paul shook the creature off and went about his business while they watched and waited with increasing astonishment that he suffered no harm. They concluded he must be “a god” (v. 6). This was now the second time Paul was mistaken for a

god (see 14:11–18), but unlike the incident at Lystra there was no attempt to worship him, and no answering rebuke from Paul.

Luke shows us through his narrative here that Paul not only had a God-given message, but that he was a “heaven-protected man” (Longenecker). We might ask why God allowed both the shipwreck and the snakebite. For such questions we are given no explanation besides the one Paul offered to the Philippians: “What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel” (Phil. 1:12).

From our own experience we can look back and see that even difficult or painful events may finally “work together for good” (Rom. 8:28) in God’s design. The good that eventually came of the shipwreck on Malta was an opportunity for a healing ministry to many there.

The first to be healed was the father of Publius, a Roman official whose title was “chief man” (Greek *prootoo*, yet another accurate designation for a local leader by Luke). Paul “visited him and prayed... putting his hands on him” (cf. James 5:14), as many a pastor or lay visitor does today. The Lord was still ministering mightily through Paul (cf. 3:1ff.). The man was healed, with the result that many other islanders afflicted in some way “also came and were cured” (v. 9). Since the word used here can also mean “receive medical care,” some have wondered if Luke himself played some role as a doctor in this ministry!

When the company prepared to depart the island, the people offered no worship, but they “honored” Paul and his companions greatly as messengers of the true God and ministers of His healing (v. 10).

A special joy to Paul on the very last leg of the long journey was the unexpected greeting brought by some more fellow Christians, a delegation from Rome itself!



A WELCOME FROM THE BROTHERS

ACTS 28:11-16

The words “After three months” signal that the ocean, closed for the winter to ship traffic because of the danger of storms, was ready to open up again. It was now early spring of AD 60 or 61. Sailing season began in early March. The soldiers and their prisoners boarded another Alexandrian grain ship that had wintered over at Malta. The ship, Luke notes, had as its figurehead the “twin gods” (v. 11), by which was meant Castor and Pollux, the sons of two different fathers (the god Zeus and the mortal Tyndareus) who were regarded by sailors of that time as divine guardians.

Once more we are treated to a kind of travelogue. The first stop on the way to Rome was Syracuse on the east coast of Sicily. After three days there, the next stop was at Rhegium, an important harbor at the very “toe” of Italy, for a pause to await a south wind. Care was needed since nearby was the dreaded whirlpool called Charybdis and its companion rock Scylla, a real threat to shipping. After a one-day wait, a “south wind sprang up” and they were able to make the 180-mile trip to Puteoli in only two days. On the way they likely saw the hulking Mt. Vesuvius, which less than 20 years later would erupt and bury Pompeii and Herculaneum. At Puteoli “we found

brothers” (v. 14), that is, fellow Christians, who invited them to stay for seven days so as to share Sunday worship. Rome was now only 75 miles away.

A special joy to Paul on the very last leg of the long journey was the unexpected greeting brought by some more fellow Christians, a delegation from Rome itself! They had heard of Paul’s arrival and came down the Appian Way, the oldest and straightest of all Roman roads, to welcome the company at the Forum of Appius, a small town 40 miles from Rome. Paul “thanked God and took courage” (v. 15), not least because it was a powerful reminder that he was not alone. There were already fellow believers here, perhaps including some of those named in the greeting list in Romans 16.

When they reached the great capital city, Julius conducted his prisoners northward past the Circus Maximus and the Forum, stopping finally at the Castra Praetoria on the northeastern fringe of the city. There he reported to the commander of the Praetorian Guard, delivering the prisoners and documents of indictment (if in fact those documents survived the shipwreck!).

Paul “was allowed to stay by himself” in his own rented house. The fact that it was “at his own expense” (v. 30) may indicate

that Paul undertook his old job of tentmaking or some other work, or possibly that his old friends in Philippi or other congregations sent money to pay his expenses. This measure of freedom under “house arrest” was understandable since Paul was not charged with a flagrant crime and was not deemed politically dangerous. Nevertheless, a guard was with him at all times, perhaps chained to him (see v. 20).

A PRISONER FREE TO PREACH!

ACTS 28:17-31

The captivating portrait of Paul in this final section is of a prisoner who remains free to preach and teach. As he had done on all his missionary journeys, Paul took pains to meet first with the Jews in Rome. The old edict of Claudius which had expelled Jews from the city at least ten years earlier (see 18:2) had lapsed with the death of Claudius. Jews were again allowed in the city. Within days of his arrival in Rome, Paul summoned the local Jewish leaders. In spite of years of persistent opposition from unbelieving Jews, he maintained an indefatigable love for his people and a desire for them to be saved. They too remained ethnic and religious “brothers” (v. 17), even though they had not yet come to faith in Jesus.

Paul certainly must have wondered what these Jews had heard about him already. He introduced himself and briefly explained his presence in Rome. It was not, he made clear, because he had done anything against “our people or the customs of our fathers” (v. 17). It was because he had appealed to Rome “though I had no charge to bring against my nation” (v. 19). Then he articulated his desire to meet them: “I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain” (v. 20). His guests must have been intrigued. What hope was this?

Almost certainly, they would have surmised, it must be the ancient hope of our Messiah!

On their part they told him what they did and did not know. They were aware that everywhere “this sect” (not a favorable term!) had been “spoken against” (v. 22). “Visitors from Rome” (2:10) had, after all, been present back at the first Pentecost! But no one had read any written warning and no contrary spokesman had made his way to them. If the hope of Israel was at stake, by all means they wanted to know what Paul had to say about it. They set a time for a second meeting, and each went out to find friends and family members who could come and hear this intense and enthusiastic rabbi.

At the second meeting where many more were present, Paul “expounded” on his Gospel message, spending a whole day testifying about the kingdom of God and about Jesus “from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets” (v. 23). We are told no more about the meeting’s content, though one could guess Paul used the same approach he used at Pisidian Antioch (13:17–41) or perhaps even some of what he had written in his epistle to the Romans. In any case it must have been an eye-opening experience for his Roman guard.

The result of the meeting mirrored what Paul had everywhere encountered on his journeys: “some were convinced... but others disbelieved” (v. 24). His audience was divided. Sharp-eyed readers will notice that verse 29 is missing in the main text. Footnotes at the bottom of the page in many Bibles alert readers to a textual variant, in which “some manuscripts” of Acts add v. 29 NIV: “After he said this, the Jews left, arguing vigorously among themselves.” We who have been to contentious church meetings know how that goes!

Paul knew firsthand the difficulty the Jews had in understanding and accepting the Gospel. We know from Romans 9–11 that it was a matter that affected him deeply and with which he wrestled long.



Hearing this divided response, Paul closed by making an observation about their resistance to the message. “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah” (v. 25) and then citing Isaiah 6:9–10, the same quote word-for-word that Jesus used to explain His reason for speaking in parables (Matt. 13:14–15):

*Go to this people, and say,
“You will indeed hear but never understand
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”
For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed;
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.*

Paul knew firsthand the difficulty the Jews had in understanding and accepting the Gospel. We know from Romans 9–11 that it was a matter that affected him deeply and with which he wrestled long. Invariably he saw the resistance of the Jews as a temporarily “closed door” that led him to an “open window.” His final statement in Acts had become the theme of his mission: “Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen” (v. 28). The final verses record Paul doing just that, making himself available to “all who came to him” (v. 30), sharing with them what he had shared with the Jews that day — the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. This he did for “two whole years... with all boldness and without hindrance” (vv. 30–31).

THE ENDING OF ACTS

So Acts ends, says William Barclay, with a virtual shout of triumph: the Gospel is being proclaimed with boldness in Rome! Thirty or so years have passed since the disciples were gathered on that first Pentecost Day, and the sound of a mighty, rushing wind filled the room where they were sitting. The Gospel has traveled 1,500 miles from the heart of Judaism to the heart of the Gentile world. How about that!

Even so, the end of the book leaves us all asking, “Well, what happened next?” What became of his appeal? Did Emperor Nero have him executed? Was he set free? We know, at the very least, that in his imprisonment, he made an impact on his guards: “It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ” (Phil. 1:13). And we may guess more. Paul’s “pastoral epistles” (1–2 Timothy and Titus) cannot be fitted satisfactorily into the three mission journeys and appear to have been written later. Because of clues in other books (Phil. 2:24, Philemon 22) and the words of church father Clement of Rome, who wrote that Paul “reached the limits of the West” before he died, it is probable that Paul was released from imprisonment in AD 62 and went on a mission to Spain thereafter.

He was arrested again for some unknown reason. According to some alternate manuscripts of 2 Timothy, he was “brought before Nero the second time” and finally executed by his order in AD 67. By the time he wrote that letter, Paul had no illusions about being freed. He wrote to Timothy:

The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day (2 Tim. 4:6–8).

Various sources agree that Paul was buried by his friends along the Ostian Way, the road that today connects Rome with her international airport. Maier writes that the “much traveled apostle would have appreciated that gesture — burial alongside a highway!”

Students hungry to explore the “rest of the story” of Paul’s life and work would do well to read Paul Maier’s intriguing book, *The Constantine Codex*. It is a fictional exploration of the idea that Luke could have written another book called “Second Acts” which details the trial before Nero and Paul’s trip to Spain thereafter. Maier, a history professor at Western Michigan, projects what may actually have taken place based on the clues we have listed.

We return to Acts. Why does Luke end the story where he does? The simplest answer is that his purpose has been served. The prophetic promise and command of Jesus in 1:8 has come to pass. The Gospel has been preached “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The story is not, after all, about Paul. It is about the message of Jesus, the “greatest story ever told,” in which we are privileged to play a role!

PERSONAL APPLICATION

REVIEW

Gracious God, thank You for the holy privilege of studying Your Word in the Book of Acts! Thank You for the instructor’s faithful work and for the fellow students I got to know. Thank You most of all for the story of the Gospel’s spread and the courage and faith of the early Christians. Inspire and shape me by Your Holy Spirit that I might play the part You give me in Your church today, that many more people may receive and enjoy the life Jesus gives. In His name I ask it. Amen.

Review

1. Page through the course notes and the questions you answered along the way. Highlight those things you especially want to remember.

2. Review the memory verse challenges. You may choose to put them on 3 x 5 cards and carry the cards with you to review during your devotion times, quiet times, or when you must wait in line.

List what you learned and how you would apply it to your personal life and the church today, using the following questions:

3. What have I learned about the geography and travel described in Acts (cities, rivers, the ocean, travel) that deepens my appreciation for the story of the early church?

4. What **discoveries** have I made in Acts about the culture of Rome and its impact on Christianity?

about the way early Christians preached and witnessed?

5. What **examples** of faith and obedience have I seen in the characters in Acts that I would like to imitate?
In Peter:

In Paul:

In three other characters in Acts:

6. What **lessons** does Acts hold for today's church? What do we need to hear and take to heart?

7. Reflect on Paul's **journeys**. How would I describe my own journey since I became God's child?

8. What **part** is the Holy Spirit leading me to play in the church today?

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Looking Back on Our Journey Through Acts



REMEMBERING A JOURNEY

The family came home from a long trip. It was everything they hoped and more. They had fun at the beach, visited the grandparents' homestead, and rode the rides at Disneyland. They played games in the car, had popcorn in the motel, and saw three coyotes in a field. They met a clown and a man hiking across the country with his dog. Part of the fun afterward was scrolling through the pictures they took, remembering the trip, and laughing together. Part was telling someone else what they did and how it felt. The world felt a little bigger and more interesting now! They had all matured, and their family bond was closer.

We've just completed a long trip through one of the great books in the Bible. We have traveled some ancient roads around the Mediterranean, met memorable characters (sorcerers, angels, Roman soldiers, and a tyrant king), listened in on sermons, debates, and tongue-speaking, and felt the joys, fears, and sorrows of some dramatic moments (miraculous rescues, a shipwreck and two stonings). What a journey it has been!

Let's take time to reflect on the reading we did, the questions we struggled to answer, the class discussions, and the prayers we prayed. What pictures will stay in our heads? What will we tell others? What will we think, say, and do as a result of our study? How will it affect our spiritual "family bond"?

THE TRIP ITINERARY

Here is the progression of the places we traveled and the lessons in each one:

TRIP OVERVIEW AND PLANNING

Lesson 1 - "Most Excellent Theophilus"

IN JERUSALEM

Lesson 2 - "Watching and Waiting"
(Selection of Matthias)

Lesson 3 - "Day of Wind and Fire" (Spirit
outpoured at Pentecost)

Lesson 4 - "In the Name of Jesus" (Lame
man healed at Temple)

Lesson 5 - "Threats, Courage, and
Community" (Threats by
Sanhedrin)

Lesson 6 - "The Baby Church Is Tested"
(Arrest of apostles)

Lesson 7 - "The Magnificent Seven"
(Stephen martyred)

IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA

Lesson 8 - "Church Scattered, Gospel
Spread" (Samaritan Pentecost)

Lesson 9 - "A Conversion That Changed the
World" (Saul's conversion on
the Damascus Road)

Lesson 10 - "A Boundary Crossed"
(Cornelius at Caesarea)

Lesson 11 - "God's Hand Strengthens and
Saves" (Peter's rescue by angel)

IN CYPRUS AND ASIA MINOR

Lesson 12 - "Mission Journeys Launched"
(Out to Cyprus and Antioch)

Lesson 13 - "The First Journey Completed"
(Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe)

BACK TO JERUSALEM

Lesson 14 - "The Council in Jerusalem"
(Decision on the Gentiles)

INTO EUROPE

Lesson 15 - "The Gospel Comes to Europe"
(Lydia converted in Macedonia)

Lesson 16 - "Journey Two: Thessalonica,
Berea, Athens" (Into Greece)

Lesson 17 - "Ministry Partnership in
Corinth" (Paul's team in Corinth)

Lesson 18 - "A Long Stay in Ephesus" (Back
to Asia Minor)

Lesson 19 - "A Tearful Farewell" (Mission
journeys end)

BACK TO JERUSALEM

Lesson 20 - "A Prophecy and an Arrest"
(Paul arrested in Jerusalem)

Lesson 21 - "Testimony in Jerusalem"
(Paul's defense before the
Jews)

IN CAESAREA

Lesson 22 - "Imprisonment in Caesarea"
(Before Governor Felix)

Lesson 23 - "The Appeal to Caesar" (Before
Governor Festus)

Lesson 24 - "Testimony Before the King"
(Before King Agrippa)

ON THE MEDITERRANEAN

Lesson 25 - "Storm and Shipwreck" (Sailing
west to Rome)

ROME AT LAST!

Lesson 26 - "The Prisoner Preaches in
Rome" (Arrival and ministry
there)

Missionaries had no air travel, nor automobiles, but traveled mostly on foot or by ship. They had no electronic communications – only letters and messengers. Yet they, by persistence and hard work, managed to bring the Gospel to Rome and plant a congregation there in less than 30 years.



EXPLORING WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

What have I learned about the *geography* and *travel* described in Acts that deepens my appreciation for the story of the early church?

The Book of Acts takes us to an array of fascinating places. Let's highlight some of them and what's of interest there.

Jerusalem – the “city at the center of history,” still one of the most discussed (and fought over) pieces of real estate on earth. It's the holy city to three of the world's great religions. Some have visited the earthly city. All believers have a “place prepared” in the heavenly one!

Damascus – world's oldest continuously-inhabited city. Where Saul's life made the great turn from persecutor to missionary.

Antioch – population 500,000, the third-largest city in the Roman Empire! Believers first called “Christians” there. “Sending” center for Gentile mission.

Athens – cultural heart of the Greek world. There Paul faced off against both idolatry and human philosophy.

Rome – the largest city and capital of Roman Empire. Its population at the time exceeded one million, and more than half were slaves! Its laws and army shaped the New Testament world. It was Paul's goal, the target at which all of Acts is aiming.

We could list other places too, including Caesarea, Cyprus, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Lystra, Malta, and more. And we could zoom in on the “places within the places,” like the upper room in Jerusalem, the beach at Miletus, the jail at Philippi, the audience hall at Caesarea, the home of Publius on Malta, and Paul's rented quarters in Rome.

Such places help us appreciate the sheer size and diversity of the world the infant church was called to reach. The distance from Jerusalem to Rome is about 1,500 miles. Missionaries had no air travel, nor automobiles, but traveled mostly on foot or by ship. They had no electronic communications – only letters and messengers. Yet they, by persistence and hard work, managed to bring the Gospel to Rome and plant a congregation there in less than 30 years.

What's more, we've read about the cultural and religious challenges the church faced, no less daunting than those in our contemporary world. There were religions galore – the Judaism that mostly opposed the early missionaries, the superstitions of sorcerers like Elymas, the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods like Zeus and Hermes, and the growing cult of emperor worship. There were Stoic and Epicurean philosophers (and others) who debated with Paul at Athens. Paul demonstrates how we must tailor our message to our audiences.

What *discoveries* have I made in Acts about the culture of Rome and its impact on Christianity?

The drama of Acts, indeed the whole New Testament, unfolds on a Roman stage.

At every turn, we meet Roman military and governmental officials – centurions, tribunes, procurators, and emperors. In those early days, they served mostly to protect the church and its missionaries. More than once Paul was rescued by Roman soldiers. Because of his Roman citizenship, the Roman justice system protected him from being lynched by his enemies during his long imprisonment, and it granted him the privilege of defending himself, which opened opportunities for his witness. The kindnesses of Claudius Lysias and Julius proved especially helpful to Paul along the way.

Roman roads, we pointed out often, made travel more swift and the “Roman peace” made it more safe than it had ever been. The edict of one Roman emperor propelled Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem for a census, and the edict of another drove Priscilla and Aquila out of Rome and into an encounter with Paul.

Archeological discoveries of Roman artifacts like inscriptions on public buildings and letter fragments such as the “Gallio Inscription” have helped us with biblical chronology and the understanding of Roman laws and governmental structure as these are reflected in the stories in Acts.



What *discoveries* have I made about the way early Christians preached and witnessed?

It’s an education to read the sermons and speeches of Peter, Stephen, and Paul.

One is struck by the centrality of Jesus’ death and, even more pointedly, His resurrection. One wonders if our preaching ought to give more space, or more “weight,” to the implications of the resurrection. Another striking observation is the use of the Old Testament. Granted, it was the only “Bible” they had at the time, and it is used more with Jewish audiences familiar with it. This writer is convinced, after listening to many sermons, that we could and should utilize the witness of the Old Testament more than we do, especially since our hearers are far more literate than people in Paul’s day and have the whole Bible at their disposal.

The chief observation about the witnessing of Christians in Acts is simply that they did it! In 8:4 (NIV), we read that “those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” The reference is to all “except the apostles” (v. 1)!

Has the church become an army that expects the officers (pastors and other leaders) to do all the fighting while the rest of us cheer them on? Admittedly, we are given little information about the substance of the witness made by the early believers. “The word” about Christ is surely what they told others. It appears that sometimes (as with Apollos and the disciples of John in Ephesus) their theology was incomplete. In each case, wiser folks like Priscilla, Aquila and Paul patiently brought them up to speed, and they kept at it. Would that more of us would share what we already know about the Lord!



What *examples* of faith and obedience have I seen in the characters in Acts that I would like to *imitate*?

Acts is full to overflowing with interesting characters, and many have something to teach us by way of example. Among those who struck this writer:

Peter – in the Gospels, he is often the “speak first, think later” kind of fellow. In Acts, he shows himself not only bold, but willing to learn, as in the story of his vision on the rooftop at Joppa.

Paul – especially striking to this writer is his bravery in the face of truly frightening enemies. Another humbling realization is the sheer hard work involved in his traveling and his “reasoning” with listeners morning till night. All of us, especially pastors, would do well to imitate his example.

Ananias of Damascus – his willingness to obey in the face of fear!

Barnabas – he lives out the meaning of his name, “the Encourager.” By his financial generosity, by his advocacy of Saul of Tarsus, and by his willingness later to play “second

fiddle” and let Saul (Paul) take the lead.

The Jailer at Philippi – no dilly-dallying about this man! He gets to the important matter of faith and family immediately, that very night.

Priscilla and Aquila – here’s a model for married couples. We watch them work together as a team helping Paul, teaching Apollos, doing what’s needed. Makes me wonder if couples might draft their own “mission statements.”

Julius – though not a Christian, he is an example of the sort of extra kindness we could all perform for others. He also symbolizes the neighbors God places around us day by day, to whom we let our light shine, as did Paul.

Lydia – this woman impresses by her offer of the use of her home as the missionaries’ home base and meeting place for the fledgling congregation.

Eutychus and Rhoda – two “bit players” whose appearance reminds us that everyone has a role in God’s great story.

There are many, many more “faces in the crowd” in Acts. Who impresses you?



What *lessons* does Acts hold for today’s church? What do we need to hear and take to heart?

This question deserves serious consideration by all of us, particularly those in leadership positions. Luke’s frequent “progress reports” reveal that the infant church was undeniably blessed with astonishing growth in the face of many obstacles. The growth was more than simple numbers. There was growth in courage and faith. Most readers of Acts feel like saying, “I wish we had more of what they had!”

So what is it that they had? Here's a "starter list" for your consideration:

The heart of things was the message of Christ, not the survival of an institution. Get the message out, no matter what!

Prayer was vital to their common life. Over and over we witness the believers and leaders praying. No mere formula prayers, these!

They were "devoted" to worship (2:42) – the message and the meal – and did not mind staying far beyond the usual time to listen and learn (20:7ff.).

They employed a different way of choosing leaders – by lots, by prayerful consensus, by selection by other leaders. No mention of voting. Hmm.

The sense of unity trumped concern for individuality. Having all things "in common" (2:44) was one powerful way that played out.

They tackled problems honestly and head-on (the neglect of widows and the role of Gentiles being two shining examples). Nor did they delay. They got to it.

The Holy Spirit is mentioned frequently, powerfully. We would do well to listen more prayerfully for the Spirit's direction and obey His promptings.

Doubtless as you read through Acts, there were other elements of their common life that impressed you as worthy of imitation. It would be interesting to share your discoveries in class with some of the leaders of your congregation (prayerfully and humbly, yes?).



Reflect on Paul's JOURNEYS. How would I describe my own journey since I became God's child?

What PART is the Holy Spirit leading me to play in the church today?

These two questions, of course, you must answer for yourself. It is a salutary thing to stop and reflect on the journey you have taken and the moments that have mattered in shaping you. It appears that Luke kept a journal during his travels with Paul. A daily (or weekly) journal might be a real blessing to help us ponder God's work in our lives. Such a journal might also bless our families, especially the children and grandchildren and prove another way to "pass the baton" to them.



A certain district president known to this writer made it his practice to read a chapter of Acts in sequence every day of his tenure – which took him through the book once a month. After being a parish pastor, he wanted this book to give him a "bigger vision" in his work with the district. He told me, "Whenever I finished Acts, which ends so abruptly, I always felt like I wanted to help write Chapter 29!"

That's a good way to conclude our study. Always it is fitting to ask, "Now what shall I do with what God has shown me?" Acts 29 is still being written!