

Source

THE BIBLE IN COMMUNITY

ACTS

Welcome to Source

Our Source

The Bible is unquestionably the most important book ever written. Not only does it speak to the issues we struggle with today (i.e., wealth, poverty, work, conflict, love, sex, forgiveness, guilt, sin, time, youth, death), but it also gives us a picture of a God who created the universe and who has been orchestrating an incredible story throughout history. While we recognize its importance, we often stay away from the Bible because it often seems unapproachable.

For these reasons, we have designed Source studies to help you engage with the Bible in a meaningful and helpful way. First, we've included an **Introduction** to each book so that from the beginning you have a clear picture of where the author is headed. Second, we've added **Notes**, which help make the ancient backgrounds of the text accessible and approachable. Third, and most important, we've created **Discussion** guides for each section of Scripture that allow you to explore and apply the passages in the context of community. These elements come together to form a very simple format for each week:

1. Before each session, read the selected passages in your Bible, look over the text notes, and answer the discussion questions.
2. Come to your small group prepared to share and discuss your responses.

Acts

The first part of the book of Acts records how God began to establish the early church in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. The second half of the book of Acts shows how the gospel then was launched out of Antioch to the ends of the known world carried by missionaries, the chief of whom was a man named Paul. This six-session study examines Paul's life as he attempted to follow God and the mission that was set before him.

Session 1 - Acts 13:1-15:35

Session 4 - Acts 21:17-23:35

Session 2 - Acts 15:36-18:22

Session 5 - Acts 24-26

Session 3 - Acts 18:23-21:16

Session 6 - Acts 27-28

Our hope is that this study will allow you to engage with the Bible in a way that incorporates the dynamics of a small group with the transformational nature of God's Word.

Acts - Introduction

The book of Acts is actually the second volume of Luke's written account of the history of the Christian movement. In his first volume, Luke tells the beginning of his story by describing the life and ministry of Jesus. The book of Acts continues the narrative with Jesus' commissioning of the disciples and then traces the development of the early church.

Luke was a doctor and also a Gentile (non-Jew) who became a follower of Jesus and accompanied the apostle Paul on several of his journeys. Probably written between AD 62 and 64, the book of Acts covers a period of about thirty years. Luke recorded this history of the early church to serve several important purposes. First, the Christian movement was growing in size and influence throughout the Roman Empire. So it was important to demonstrate that Christians were good citizens, that they were reasonable, peaceful and charitable. Luke does this throughout his account. For example, he records how several different officials legally declared Paul innocent and harmless regarding the charges brought against him. Also, the book of Acts (like Luke's first volume) is written to a man named Theophilus, who probably supported Luke while he was writing and then helped publicize his work. As a well-to-do Greek and possibly a Roman official, this man's sponsorship would have provided further evidence of the Christian movement's good standing within Roman society.

But the book of Acts was primarily written for believers-at-large within the Christian movement, especially those who were not Jews. The Greeks and Romans feared that the gods were fickle and might pick new favorites at any time. But Luke's historical account shows that the true God is unchanging and can be trusted completely. It tells how God kept the promise he made to the Jewish people by sending them Jesus as their long-awaited "Messiah" or Savior. Many of the Jews believed in Jesus, yet their nation, as a whole, did not. However, God's purposes had been grander than just the nation of Israel: Jesus had come to provide salvation for people of all nations. Luke's history of the early church thus demonstrates that the extension of God's blessings to people such as Theophilus and other Gentiles represents not a fickle change in plans, but the masterful fulfillment of a plan God had been pursuing over the ages to bless all peoples on the earth. To drive this point home, at the very end of Acts, Paul challenges a Jewish audience by saying, "I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"

So the book of Acts tells the story of how God first invited the Jewish people, and then the people of all nations, to follow Jesus. The very form of Luke's historical writing reflects this message. In his first volume, the book of Luke, the movement is toward Jerusalem, the center of Jewish national life. In the book of Acts, the movement is away from Jerusalem and out toward other nations. "You will be my witnesses," Jesus says to his followers, "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Like other historians of his day, Luke provided an outline of important events during this time period and stocked it with details from the sources available to him: letters, speeches, songs, travel accounts, trial transcripts, and biographical anecdotes. Some travel accounts are reported from an eyewitness standpoint (e.g., "From Troas we put out to sea...") when Luke was actually traveling with Paul. The book of Acts has six main parts, which are often marked off with a summary statement like: "the Word of God continued to increase and spread" (6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, and 28:21). Each part describes a phase in the expansion of the Christian movement outward from Jerusalem, the first three focusing on Jews and the second three focusing on Gentiles.

In the first part, the church is established in Jerusalem and becomes Greek speaking so that it will eventually be able to spread its message throughout the Roman Empire. Peter, one of Jesus's closest followers, is its primary leader and spokesperson. In the second part, the movement expands into the rest of Palestine, partly due to persecution and the scattering of Christians away from Jerusalem. Also, Paul, once a persecutor of the church, becomes a Christian. In the third part, God reveals to Peter and others that Gentiles are included in God's overarching plan of salvation. In the fourth part, the movement intentionally sends Paul and other messengers westward into Asia Minor (modern Turkey) to tell both Jews and Gentiles about God's grace. No longer a small Jewish sect, Christianity becomes a multi-ethnic movement. In the fifth part, Paul and these messengers enter Europe and establish communities of faith. Many of Paul's letters in the New Testament were written to these communities. In the final part, the movement reaches all the way to Rome and into the highest levels of society. The invitation to follow Jesus is thus extended to all nations.

Source

THE BIBLE IN COMMUNITY

A major theme in the book of Acts is the work of the Holy Spirit. Early on in the account, Luke describes how God's Spirit empowered followers of Jesus to boldly proclaim their message to others. Those who accepted the invitation to place their faith in Jesus were filled with the presence of God's Spirit in their own hearts and lives. Sometimes this even manifested itself through miraculous signs. In addition, the Holy Spirit often guided Paul and others when they made decisions about where to travel and with whom they should interact. And only when Gentile seekers experienced the Holy Spirit in powerful ways did Jewish believers understand the universal scope of God's message of salvation. These various movements of the Spirit in the book of Acts provided confirmation to those in the young community of faith that the story they were telling was part of an epic story that God was writing through them.

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Session 1 - Notes on Acts 13:1-15:35

13:1

Antioch was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, located in what is now Antakya in southeast Turkey, a little over 300 miles north of Jerusalem. In Acts 11:19, it is recorded that early Christians traveled to Antioch to escape persecution. Many in Antioch converted to Christianity and thus the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to the city to assess the situation and provide guidance (11:22). Later, Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch (11:25-26).

The leaders of the church in Antioch are described as prophets and teachers. Those identified in the book of Acts as prophets had been given the spiritual gift of prophecy and functioned much like the Old Testament prophets in that they spoke for God. Sometimes this included predictions of the future (see Agabus in 11:27-28) but usually this referred to specific messages God had for the church.

13:6

Jewish magicians were considered to be the best of their kind in the Roman Empire and it was not uncommon for Roman leaders to keep private sorcerers in their courts as advisors.

13:7

The proconsul was the highest Roman official on the island. Sergius Paulus held that office on Cyprus around AD 45-46 (BBC, 358).

13:9

As a Roman citizen, Saul would have had a Romanized version of his name. Historical inscriptions show that it was common practice for a person's Roman name to sound very similar to his Jewish name. The shift in this verse is not a name change. Since he was now carrying the gospel into predominately Roman circles, he began to use his Roman name, Paul.

13:13-14:26

The cities Paul's group visits in these verses were all located along the same Roman road, the Via Augusta, which was a military artery constructed roughly 50 years prior (BBC, 359).

13:51-52

It was Jewish custom to shake the dust from one's feet upon returning to the Holy Land as a symbolic cleansing from the pollution of those who do not worship the one true God. In Luke 10:10-12, Jesus told his disciples that when they were not welcomed into a town, they should wipe even the town's dust from their feet. Paul and Barnabas' action can be interpreted as an accusation that those who rejected them stand under God's judgment.

14:9-11

In classical Greek mythology, Hermes was the messenger of the gods and spoke for Zeus, the king of the gods. The local folklore of this region held that these two gods had once paid a visit to the city of Lystra only to be received most inhospitably by all save one old couple—Baucis and Philemon. The gods saved these two, while the rest of the population was destroyed by a flood. Rightly acknowledging that only divine power could have wrought such a miracle and not wishing to repeat the mistake of their ancestors, the Lycaonians attempted to honor Paul and Barnabas as gods (BBC, 362).

14:14

In Jewish culture, the tearing of one's clothes was an expression of immense grief, and a requirement upon hearing blasphemy.

14:18-14:20

Mobs can be quite fickle, especially in cases where deeply held beliefs are challenged. When Paul and Barnabas denied that they were gods and called the pagan gods worthless, the mob could either change its mind about the two miracle workers or abandon their pagan religion. Clinging to their pagan beliefs, the townspeople now viewed Paul and Barnabas as impious

blasphemers and wicked sorcerers. The miracle, which they at first celebrated as the working of gods, they now saw as evil magic meant to lead them astray.

Stoning was the most common form of urban mob violence at the time as tiles, stones, and cobbles were readily available in ancient streets. Pelting the victim with large rocks was intended to be a form of execution and generally led to the accused's death. The fact that Paul not only survived the attack after the mob took him for dead, but was also able to walk away, points to a miraculous intervention by God.

14:23

In the Old Testament, elders governed towns and served as judges, not only in Israel, but in much of the rest of the Mediterranean world as well. Synagogues were ruled by a council of elders and this form of rule continued into New Testament churches.

15:1

The primarily Jewish church continued to wrestle with the inclusion of Gentiles. Peter's vision and subsequent baptism of Cornelius (10:1-11:18) showed that God clearly intended for the Gentiles to be a part of the church—but on what terms? The rapid conversion of Gentiles quickly brought this issue to a head. Many of the Jews felt that Gentiles should be included into the church only if they fulfilled the same requirements placed on converts to Judaism: circumcision and an obligation to observe the Mosaic Law. But these were man-made restrictions that God did not mandate for Gentile converts.

15:2

The church began in Jerusalem and was the center of the Christian movement. Thus it was the place to resolve an issue of this magnitude.

15:19-20

Peter, one of Jesus's twelve disciples and a pivotal leader of the church, spoke out in favor of the Gentiles. Then, after hearing from Paul and Barnabas, the meeting was concluded by James, one of Jesus' brothers (Matthew 13:55), another pivotal leader of the church in

Jerusalem. The few requirements James suggested represent a handful of laws that Jewish tradition states God gave to Noah. These were meant not as requirements for salvation, but as commands to ease the assimilation of Gentiles into fellowship with Jewish Christians.

Session 1 - Discussion

Introduction

At the end of his time on earth, Jesus made the following declaration: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The first part of the book of Acts (1-12) records how this began to come true—with the gospel spreading to Jerusalem, then to Samaria, and then as far as Antioch. The second half of the book of Acts shows how the gospel was then launched out of Antioch to the ends of the known world, carried by missionaries, the chief of which was a man named Paul.

Discussion Questions

1. Where is the farthest place you have traveled? What was difficult about being in another place and culture?
2. God had a specific mission for Paul and Barnabas (13:2)—to travel to different places and cultures telling others about the good news of Jesus. How would you feel if God gave you this assignment?
3. How did you hear about the good news of Jesus? Who stepped out to make sure you were exposed to the message of Christianity?
4. Paul and Barnabas faced opposition seemingly at every turn—a sorcerer in Cyprus, Jews in Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, and an angry mob in Lystra. Have you ever experienced opposition from someone when talking about your faith? Why do discussions of religion elicit such strong reactions?
5. In Pisidian Antioch, Paul preached about Christ in the Jewish synagogue, showing how Old Testament events pointed to the life and death of Jesus. The climax of his speech is in 13:38-39. What do you think the impact would have been on Paul’s Jewish listeners, who would have spent their whole lives believing that approval from God was found through obeying the laws of Moses? How does the message Paul preached strike you?

6. The decision reached at the Council of Jerusalem was that the gospel is for everyone and should not be complicated and convoluted. Why is it so difficult to grasp that a right relationship with God is available for free with no strings attached? How has the church in our day made it difficult for people to turn to God by adding on to the simple message of forgiveness?

Think About It

The message of Jesus is for everyone who simply believes. This truth propelled Paul and Barnabas to go to different people and places. It steeled them when they faced opposition. How has this truth influenced the direction of your life?

What Will You Do?

God set Paul and Barnabas apart for a specific mission. What is God calling you to do in light of his simple message of forgiveness?

Changing Your Mind

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. (Acts 13:38)

Session 2 - Notes on Acts 15:36-18:22

15:36-41

While Paul and Barnabas were united in their goal—to encourage the churches they had started on their first trip—a division arose between them regarding the inclusion of John Mark, who had left them on their first trip (13:13). So Barnabas and John Mark headed to Cyprus, the first place they had visited, while Paul chose Silas (15:22, 32) and headed to Lystra and Derbe, the last place they had visited. This second journey (Acts 15:39-18:22) occurred during AD 49-52.

16:2-3

Even though the Jerusalem Council decided that believers did not need to be circumcised, and even though Paul didn't allow Titus to be circumcised under different circumstances (Galatians 2:1-5), in Lystra Paul encouraged Timothy to submit to the ritual to remove a possible barrier to Timothy's ministry to Jews.

16:6-9

In his travels Paul was very strategic, often visiting major cities on well-traveled trade routes. But his journeys were also guided by the Spirit. We do not know exactly how the Spirit impressed upon him not to travel southwest to the province of Asia or north to Bithynia—it could have been through external circumstances, inward prompting, or a prophetic message—but we do know that through a vision, the Spirit indicated he was to travel west to Macedonia.

16:10

In this verse, Luke begins to use the pronoun “we,” indicating that he has joined Paul's company and is an eyewitness to many of the events that follow.

16:12

Philippi was a port city that became a Roman colony in 42 BC and was heavily populated by Romans. It sat on the Egnatian Way, a major transportation artery built around 148 BC that connected Italy with the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire.

16:13

Paul's customary approach upon entering a new town was to go to the local synagogue (17:2-3); however, it appears that there was no synagogue in Philippi. At that time, the requirement was that there be ten Jewish men in a place to constitute the building of a synagogue. So the followers of Judaism in Philippi met outside the city near the Gangites River.

16:16

Paul, tired of the unsolicited publicity, freed the slave girl “who had a spirit.” The Greek could be literally translated, “who had a spirit of Python.” In Greek mythology, the Python, a great snake, guarded the Delphic oracle and was killed by the god Apollo. From this, the word came to be used of people through whom the python spirit supposedly spoke. Her owners likely associated her with the famous oracle at Delphi in central Greece and made financial profit from her demon possession and supposed predictions.

16:19-21

The owners of the girl dragged Paul and Silas to the marketplace, which served as the geographic and civic center of the city. They were brought before the two Roman magistrates, whose attendants (called lectors) carried bundles of rods with them as symbols of the magistrates' power to inflict corporal and even capital punishment. It was with these rods that Paul and Silas were beaten after being stripped in order to humiliate them and discourage anyone from following their example.

16:35-40

The magistrates could have seen the earthquake as a divine sign, especially since it was strong enough to throw open the doors and throw off the chains, yet did not bring down the prison roof. Or perhaps they felt that the public beating was enough punishment. Regardless, their decision to release the prisoners was complicated when Paul announced his citizenship. Roman citizenship was a mark of high status and afforded Paul special privileges and rights, one of which was protection from a beating without trial. Now the tables were turned and it was the magistrates who were at Paul's mercy. News of this could have stripped them from their office.

17:1

Paul and his companions traveled 100 miles west along the Egnatian Way and arrived at Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia. This port city boasted a population of 200,000.

17:7

The Romans did not care about theological debates over Jewish Scripture, so the Jews of Thessalonica accused Paul and his companions of treason—a very serious charge to the Romans. Certainly statements made about “King” Jesus must have sounded suspicious.

17:10

Paul left the Egnatian Way and traveled 60 miles south to Berea.

17:16

Paul continued south to Athens, which was still a leading center for culture, despite having reached its zenith five centuries before. The city was full of statues and temples dedicated to various gods, which was obviously disturbing to one who believed in the one, true God.

17:18

The Epicureans and Stoics were two schools of Greek philosophy. Epicureans believed that happiness was derived from pleasure and sought freedom from pain, trouble, and annoyances. Stoics believed that one should pursue virtue over pleasure and stressed responsibility and rationality. The word translated “babblers” originally applied to birds pecking at seeds and later was extended to people who would pick up ideas here and there and then parade them with pretense and show.

17:19

The Council of Areopagus was a meeting of philosophers who presided over moral and religious matters.

17:28

There are two quotations here- “in him we live and move and have our being” is from the Cretan poet Epimenides (600 BC) from his *Cretica*, and “we are his offspring” is from the Cilician poet Aratus (315-240 BC) from his *Phainomena*.

18:1

At this time, Corinth was the political and economic center of Greece, surpassing even Athens in importance. It also had a reputation for immorality, epitomized by the temple of Aphrodite and its temple prostitutes.

18:2-3

Claudius, as Emperor (AD 41-54), had expelled all Jews from Rome because of “continual tumults instigated by Chrestus” according to Suetonius (*Claudius*, 25). Likely this referred to Jewish opposition to preaching about Christ (Barker, 1873). As a result, Paul finds fellow Jewish “tentmakers” or more generally “leatherworkers” in Corinth.

18:12-15

In AD 51-52, Gallio became proconsul of Achaia, a Roman province in southern Greece. He was the brother of Seneca, the famous philosopher. Gallio’s refusal to hear this case meant that he viewed Christianity as a sect of Judaism, which was a recognized and legal religion.

Session 2 - Discussion

Introduction

God had a specific mission for Paul—to go into the world and tell people about the forgiveness offered by Jesus. In fulfilling that mission, Paul was dependent on God to direct him as he followed the leading of the Spirit and interacted with all types of people and environments. Though we likely won't come across a spirit-possessed slave girl, a jailer, or a group of philosophers this week, each day we have the opportunity to follow God's lead and be sensitive to how he might be moving in the lives of people around us.

Discussion Questions

1. Paul and Barnabas, two people strongly committed to following God's lead, couldn't agree on John Mark. What makes it difficult to determine which paths God wants us to take? When have you struggled with what God wanted you to do?
2. When you have a strong disagreement with someone, what is the wise way to handle it? When have you handled a disagreement well? When have you dealt with it poorly? What were the results?
3. In Acts 16:6-10, Paul receives guidance from the Holy Spirit several times. How do you seek guidance from God? How are you able to discern which direction to take?
4. Paul started out with the intent to visit the churches he had started on his last trip. But God had a different plan and soon Paul found himself in Macedonia, spreading the gospel to new places. How has God taken your life in different directions than you expected? What has God done through these detours?
5. In Philippi, Paul shared the gospel with a wealthy merchant and a city jailer. Who has God put in your life that you have had the opportunity to influence? What about the people who have influenced you? How did God orchestrate the circumstances so that your paths crossed?

6. While in Athens, Paul sought common ground with the philosophers as he explained the gospel to them. What can we learn from this example about talking with those whom God sends across our paths?

Think About It

Paul showed amazing adaptability as he followed God. How attuned are you to where God wants you to go, what he wants you to do, what he wants you to say, and who he wants you to be?

What Will You Do?

How can you be more dependent on God to direct your steps this week?

Changing Your Mind

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid: keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." (Acts 18:9-10)

Session 3 - Notes on Acts 18:23-21:16

18:23

Paul embarked from Antioch on his third missionary journey (18:23-21:16).

18:24

Apollos is introduced as a native of Alexandria, a cosmopolitan city in Egypt founded by Alexander the Great. It was the second most important city in the Roman Empire and home to a great university and a thriving Jewish population. Describing Apollos as “learned” probably means “formally trained in rhetoric” (BBC, 377).

18:25

Apollos only knew of John’s baptism, which was based on repentance, not on faith in the finished work of Christ (Barker, 1874).

18:27

Apollos left for Achaia, which was a Roman province in southern Greece. The capital of Achaia was Corinth, which Paul had visited at the end of his last trip.

19:1

Paul returned to Ephesus, a city he had visited for a short time upon leaving Corinth on his way to Jerusalem. Ephesus was the chief city of the Roman province of Asia (modern-day Turkey). As the largest city of the most populous and prosperous province in the empire, it was a leading business center and a hub of land and sea transportation. Although Pergamum was the official capital of Asia, Ephesus was the real seat of the provincial administration (BBC, 378).

19:1-7

The twelve people Paul encountered in Ephesus had not been baptized in the name of Jesus and thus had not received the Spirit. Upon becoming a Christian, believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, the Spirit would indwell individuals from time to time (Numbers 11:17; Deuteronomy 34:9; Judges 15:14; 1 Samuel 11:6; 16:13), but the prophets looked forward to a time when God's Spirit would be poured out on all his people (Ezekiel 36:22-28; Joel 2:25-32; Zechariah 12:10). This occurred on the day of Pentecost as recorded in the second chapter of Acts. Since that time, conversion has always been accompanied by the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:38-39). Earlier when Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, received the Spirit, it too was marked by external signs, such as inspired speech (Acts 11:44-48).

19:9

As was his custom, Paul first preached in the local synagogue until he was turned away. Then he began teaching in a public lecture hall. Lecture halls were generally used for instruction in philosophy or rhetoric in the cooler morning hours. During the heat of the day, such halls often stood empty. Tyrannus was likely either the owner or the main lecturer.

19:11-20

"Although some Ephesians who knew no better may have regarded Paul as a magician, God seems to have healed them anyway to draw their attention to his message (19:11-12); but God would not tolerate unauthorized use of Jesus's name," (BBC, 379) as the seven sons (or followers) of Sceva discovered. Ephesus was such a huge center for occult practices that ancient texts often refer to magical texts as Ephesia grammata, or Ephesian writings. Burning books was considered a means of renouncing their contents (BBC, 379). A drachma was equal to a day's wages.

19:23

"The Way" was an early name for Christianity (Acts 9:2; 16:17; 18:25-26; 19:9; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

19:24-27

Artemis is the Greek name for the Roman goddess Diana. The Ephesian Artemis, however, was distinctly different from the Artemis of the rest of the Greco-Roman world, taking on characteristics of the Asian fertility goddess, Cybele. Her temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and housed a statue of her that supposedly fell from heaven. As becomes apparent in this narrative, “In Ephesus, politics and religion were as heavily intertwined as religion and economics, and local civic pride was inseparable from the worship of the Ephesian Artemis” (BBC, 380-381).

19:35-41

When Rome subjugated a city, it appointed local leaders to assure the uninterrupted flow of taxes to Rome, primarily by maintaining peace and order. The city clerk was the highest of these officials.

20:5-6

Luke’s use of “us” and “we” indicates that he has rejoined the group at this point.

20:16

Because of a plot against his life in Greece, Paul opted to travel back to Jerusalem via land instead of sea (Acts 20:3), which would have greatly delayed his urgent mission. He was carrying a collection of money for the church in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15; Romans 15:25-28) from the churches he had visited and wanted to present these churches’ offerings at the festival of Pentecost as a symbol of unity between Jewish and Gentile believers (BBC, 383).

20:35

Jesus is not recorded as having said these words anywhere in the Gospels. It is obvious that not all his words were written down (John 21:25), so the apostles probably passed along this saying orally.

21:4

It is unlikely Luke was indicating that Paul disobeyed the Holy Spirit by continuing on to Jerusalem, or that the Holy Spirit was giving contradicting messages. Far more likely, these other believers received the same warning from the Holy Spirit that Paul received (Acts 20:23), but drew the conclusion that Paul should not face these trials. Paul knew he had to face the difficulties ahead, not shy away from them.

21:10

Agabus accurately predicted a famine in Jerusalem fifteen years prior (Acts 11:27-29).

Session 3 - Discussion

Introduction

Paul's third missionary journey was very similar to his previous two—fraught with adventure as he traveled from city to city boldly proclaiming Christianity to all who would listen. He encountered magicians, enraged crowds, and foreboding prophecies. Yet he pressed on to finish the race to which he had been called. He persevered, even in the face of grave circumstances, setting an example for us to follow.

Discussion Questions

1. What is one of the hardest challenges you have faced? It could be a physical challenge, a career challenge, a challenging circumstance, or a challenging relationship. What enabled you to persevere?
2. To a large extent, our ability to persevere is drawn from our motivations. Some are motivated by fame or power, such as the seven sons of Sceva. Some, like Demetrius, are motivated by financial gain. What motivated Paul? What motivates you?
3. How do challenges reveal your true motivations?
4. When addressing the Ephesian elders, Paul warned them that listening to those who distort the truth would prevent many of them from finishing the race (Acts 20:28-31). What are some of the distortions that people believe that prevent them from finishing the race? How can we guard ourselves from such things?
5. Paul was determined to go to Jerusalem, though he knew that it would cost him. When have you made a decision to follow Jesus knowing that it would cost you something?
6. Is there a decision you've been putting off because you know it will cost you? Is there a difficult situation you need to address? What is God compelling you to do?

Think About It

As you think about what God is compelling you to do, what are the true costs involved? What will it cost you to act? What will it cost you not to act?

What Will You Do?

What will you do this week to act on what God is compelling you to do?

Changing Your Mind

I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. (Acts 20:24)

Session 4 - Notes on Acts 21:17-23:35

21:17-18

This warm reception led by James, Jesus' brother and the main leader of the church in Jerusalem (see the text note on 15:19-20), was an endorsement of Paul's controversial work among the Gentiles and a show of solidarity. It also indicated the grateful reception of the offering Paul had collected.

21:20-22

Jewish-Gentile tensions had escalated in recent years to the point that assassins were regularly murdering members of the aristocracy who were suspected of collaborating with the Gentiles. The prevalent Jewish nationalism was intolerant of its people having any form of fellowship with outsiders. "Thus it is incumbent on Paul to prove the integrity of his Jewishness; he cannot compromise the Gentile mission, but he will intentionally affirm his Jewish heritage at any cost short of unbiblical exclusivism" (BBC, 386).

21:23-24

"These precautions are to protect Paul from false accusations, especially if he is going to move about publicly in the temple courts. Paul pays the fees for the devout Jerusalem Christians who are completing a Nazirite vow; the Greek language here suggests that he may also be paying for an earlier vow he completed while unable to come to Palestine (18:18). One shaved one's head on the seventh day of a vow and offered sacrifice in the temple on the eighth day (Num 6:1-21), but the minimum period of the vow according to ritual law seems to have been thirty days, so he did not join them in vows only at this point. Those (like Agrippa I) who used their own funds to pay the expenses of Nazirites were considered pious" (BBC, 387).

21:28

Between the outer court, which was open to Gentiles, and the rest of the temple was an inscription which read, "Any foreigner who passes this point will be responsible for his own death." This was the one case in which the Romans allowed Jewish authorities to use the death penalty (BBC, 387).

21:31-32

The north end of the temple grounds was connected to the fortress Atonia by two flights of steps, with a tower that overlooked the temple area. It housed 600 troops under the command of Claudius Lysias (Acts 22:36). Since “officers” is plural, it indicates that at least 160 troops (an officer or centurion commanded upwards of 80 men) went to disperse the crowd.

21:37-38

Greek was the language of the cultured and the educated. Speaking Greek grabbed the commander’s attention, let him know that Paul was not merely a common rebel starting trouble in the streets, and gave Paul an opportunity to make a defense. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote about a revolt that occurred in Jerusalem in AD 54, in which an Egyptian led 4,000 people into the desert and then disappeared. The commander assumed that Paul was this Egyptian rebel leader (Barker, 1881).

21:39

Paul was born in Tarsus, located in what is modern-day southeast Turkey. “It was an important commercial center, university city, and crossroads of travel” (Barker, 1881).

21:40-22:2

Aramaic was the common language spoken among the Jews living in Jerusalem. In the same way he got the commander’s attention, Paul commands the crowd’s attention by speaking a language they all knew, implying that he is a devout Jew and has respect for Jewish laws and customs.

22:3

Though he was born in Tarsus, Paul’s education in Judaism took place in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, one of the most honored rabbis of that century. His subsequent persecution of Christians demonstrated his zeal for Judaism; however, that all changed when he encountered the resurrected Christ on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19; 26:12-18).

22:24-28

The flogging the commander ordered was not with the rod, as Paul was flogged in Philippi, but with the scourge, a whip of leather thongs with pieces of bone or metal on their ends. As a Roman citizen, Paul was legally exempt from all forms of degrading punishment, yet he waited to tell his captors about his citizenship until they had already violated the law by chaining him, thus giving Paul legal grounds for maneuvering against them (Barker, 1882) (BBC, 390).

Buying citizenship was common and a good revenue source for the Roman government, but paid citizenship was considered inferior to being born a citizen.

23:2-5

Paul is brought before the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews. In the writings of Josephus, a respected Jewish historian, Ananias (high priest from AD 47-59) is described as greedy, profane, and hot-tempered. Paul's comment that he didn't recognize Ananias as the high priest is likely intended irony—Paul considered Ananias unworthy of the office of high priest, which Ananias evidenced by his illegal command to have Paul struck. Paul then cites Exodus 22:28 to again affirm his knowledge of Jewish laws and customs.

23:23-24

The Roman governor resided in Caesarea, sixty miles from Jerusalem.

23:26

The emperor Claudius appointed Antonius Felix governor of Judea around AD 52 as a favor to Felix's brother, Pallas. The brothers were former slaves who had been granted their freedom. The Roman historian Tacitus said that Felix "held the power of a tyrant with the disposition of a slave," which at the time amounted to an accusation of extreme corruption. Josephus corroborates this account, accusing Felix of corruption, massacres, and repression (Barker, 1884).

23:31

Antipas was a military outpost halfway between Jerusalem and Caesarea.

Session 4 - Discussion

Introduction

Paul returned to Jerusalem to find what he expected—a hostile situation that he had to navigate through in order to gain a hearing. Like Paul, as Christians we can find ourselves in situations where people are opposed to our beliefs. And though our lives may not be at stake, the integrity of what we believe and the openness of others to hearing what we have to say is. If we push too hard, or not hard enough, we can find ourselves losing our influence with others.

Discussion Questions

1. The Jews in Jerusalem were enraged at Paul because he was including Gentiles into the family of faith (22:21-22) and they had been told that he was encouraging Jews everywhere to turn away from the traditions of Judaism (21:21). What issues today draw fire from those who disagree with Christianity?
2. Paul was very respectful of his fellow Jews, submitting himself to the practices that would earn him favor in their eyes (21:26), and yet not compromising what he considered essential—the inclusion of Gentiles (22:21). When you are around people who do not share your beliefs, how do you determine where to compromise and where to stand firm?
3. Have you ever known someone who was able to build bridges with others and gain influence with those who did not share their beliefs? How did this person do this?
4. When have you been successful in building common ground with people who did not share your beliefs? Is there anything else you could be doing to build common ground?
5. When have you felt it was necessary to take a stand for your beliefs? What happened?
6. Is there any area today where you feel like you need to make a stand?
7. Rome was not a friend to the Jewish state and yet in this instance, God used Roman power to save Paul's life. From what unexpected sources have you received help in times when you have chosen to take a stand and follow God?

Think About It

Who is someone in your life who doesn't share your beliefs? Is there anything you can do to increase your influence in their life? What would it be?

What Will You Do?

What will you do this week to begin to build bridges with someone you hope to influence?

Changing Your Mind

Then he said "The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard." (Acts 22:14-15)

Session 5 - Notes on Acts 24-26

24:2-3

Paul was brought to trial before the Roman governor Felix. In both Jewish and Roman trials, the prosecution always began first. Tertullus, the hired lawyer/orator, began his speech with flattery to win Felix's goodwill, which was a standard rhetorical tactic of the time called *captatio benevolentiae*. The flattery is blatantly false, as Felix brought neither peace nor reforms (BBC, 394).

24:5-8

The three charges Tertullus brought against Paul were that he was guilty of treason against Rome as a troublemaker who started riots, that he was the leader of an unrecognized and hence illegal religion (Nazarene sect—a reference to Christianity in the fact that Jesus was from Nazareth), and that he had attempted to desecrate the temple (by bringing a Gentile into the inner courts, 21:27-28).

The King James Version of the Bible included an expanded conclusion to verse 6, all of verse 7, and an additional phrase in verse 8: “[6] and would have judged according to our law. [7] But the chief captain Lysias came upon us, and with great violence took him away out of our hands, [8] Commanding his accusers to come unto thee,” but these statements do not appear in the earliest copies of the Bible and appear to be an example of a scribe adding details in the process of copying. This section is omitted or placed in brackets in most modern translations.

24:10-16

Paul also began his defense with *captatio benevolentiae*, but more modestly and creditably. He then pointed out that his accusers could offer no proof against him, while confessing that the one charge he was guilty of (being a Christian) was a matter of internal Jewish debate, and not an issue to be brought before a Roman court (since Judaism was recognized as a legal religion). The only ones who could possibly bring proof against him—the Jews from Asia—were not present. Likely this is because they instigated the riot, which would have become clear during the trial and led to their arrest and punishment (BBC, 396).

24:22

Felix, who had been governor of Judea for six years, would have undoubtedly become familiar with Christianity as it was by then a full-fledged movement.

24:24

Drusilla was Felix's third wife and daughter of Herod Agrippa I. At 15 she married Azizus, king of a small region in Syria, but left him for Felix a year later (BBC, 396).

24:27

Rome recalled Felix in AD 59 or 60 because of disturbances and irregularities in his administration—notably his handling of riots between Jewish and Syrian inhabitants and accusations of corruption. Jewish leaders would travel to Rome to accuse Felix, so this “favor” was probably meant to help soften their accusations against him (Barker, 1886).

The historian Josephus painted his replacement, Festus, in a much more positive light. Festus corrected several of the disturbances of Felix's administration and caught many of the revolutionaries who were plaguing the area. He died after serving only a year or two in office (BBC, 396).

25:8

In his trial before Festus, Paul emphasized how he respected the Jewish law and had not violated its customs by taking a Greek into the temple. Nor did he preach a political rival of Rome, but rather a spiritual kingdom of God. He advocated respect for civil authority (Romans 13:1-7) and prayer for civil leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-2) (Barker, 1886).

25:10-11

Not wanting to fall into the trap of being transported to Jerusalem, Paul appealed to Caesar, which was the right of every Roman citizen. To appeal to Caesar did not mean that Caesar would personally hear the case, but that the case would be heard by the highest courts in

Rome. By granting this appeal, Festus was able to avoid making a decision that would jeopardize his standing among the Jews. It also gave Paul a means of traveling to Rome, where he had been called to preach the gospel (Acts 23:11).

25:13

Herod Agrippa II, a Jew, ruled over a small part of Palestine under Roman authority. Part of his responsibilities included controlling the temple treasury and appointing the high priests. While he was an advocate for his people, he was loyal to Rome and ultimately sided with the empire when the Jews revolted in AD 70. Bernice was his sister, who lived with her brother for a time after the death of her husband (Herod Chalcis, who was also her uncle). Their visit to Festus shortly after his arrival displayed their desire to gain his favor.

26:14

Paul was brought before Agrippa, not as an official trial, but in an informal hearing. Paul recounted his defense, including his conversion experience. One unique detail is the expression “to kick against the goads,” which was a Greek proverb for useless resistance. It essentially means, “You are only hurting yourself” (Barker, 1888).

26:24

Festus declared that Paul’s great learning had driven him insane. He was undoubtedly referring to Paul’s Jewish learning, but possibly also his training in Greco-Roman rhetoric. It was common for educated Romans to dismiss foreign concepts, such as the resurrection, as insane (BBC, 400).

26:26

Paul then turned to Agrippa. It would have been impossible for the events of Christianity to escape Agrippa’s notice. People were still alive at this point who had been with Jesus—who were eyewitnesses to his miracles and resurrection. Thousands of Jews in Jerusalem alone had become followers of The Way. All of these things were quite public for everyone to see. And yet Agrippa slyly avoids making any commitment.

Session 5 - Discussion

Introduction

It must have been incredibly frustrating for Paul to spend two years in prison on charges that could have been immediately dismissed. And yet he persevered, following the path that God marked for him and presenting a reasonable defense at every turn. We often find ourselves in situations we don't understand, and it is tempting to manipulate events to reach our desired outcomes. But ultimately, we, like Paul, must trust that God knows what he is doing and choose to follow.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had an experience you were sure was “bad” at the time, but which later proved to be very good?
2. Paul had several opportunities to converse privately with his judge, but rather than trying to win favor, his convicting message elicited fear in Felix (24:25). How do you interact with people who seem to have immense power over your life—bosses, customers, police officers, etc.? How do you try to shape their impression of you?
3. Luke seems to indicate that Felix was willing to release Paul only if he were offered a bribe. Have you ever been tempted to do a “little wrong” in order to secure a “greater good”? How does society feel about such tradeoffs? How do you feel?
4. Paul defended himself in front of three separate assemblies, all of which seemed to have complete power over his life. And while he presented a reasonable defense, he did not leave out the truths he knew would be offensive to his audience (such as the resurrection from the dead). Have you ever “edited” your story to leave out embarrassing details or offensive truths? What does one risk by telling the whole truth?
5. In defending himself, Paul was very truthful, but he was also very respectful and reasoned. How would others say you represent Christianity?

6. Paul time and again referred back to his own story of how God had changed his life. If asked to reasonably defend your belief in Christianity, what parts of your story would you bring up?

Think About It

Is there a situation in your life where you are tempted to take a shortcut? What would happen if you did? What would happen if you continued to speak the truth and do the right thing?

What Will You Do?

How can you trust God's leading this week, telling the truth and doing things the right way?

Changing Your Mind

Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." (Acts 26:29)

Session 6 - Notes on Acts 27-28

27:1-28:16

The narrative in these chapters is unarguably an eyewitness account. The details of the voyage, including the time it took to reach specific harbors given the winds mentioned, match exactly the report of one who had taken such a journey.

27:1-6

The soldiers, Paul, and the other prisoners set sail up the coast of Syria and Asia Minor. Julius, the centurion in charge, was looking for a ship headed straight for Rome and found one, a grain ship (v. 38), in the port of Myra. Rome's grain fleet accounted for the majority of Mediterranean trade. Ships would travel from Alexandria to Rome on a journey taking roughly two months, but then make the return journey in less than two weeks because of the winds. These Egyptian grain ships were about 180 feet long, 45 feet wide, and 40 feet deep—much bigger than the standard vessel at that time (BBC, 401).

27:7-9

The prevailing wind in the late summer was from the west or northwest, and the ship found it difficult to head west—thus the detour south around Crete, the largest island in the Aegean Sea.

27:9-12

Sea travel became more dangerous as winter approached, and most considered sailing after September 15 risky and sailing after November 10 as almost impossible. The Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, fell on October 5 in AD 59, so Paul's warning of impending danger was well-founded (Bruce, 481).

27:13-19

Driven by the typhoon-like Northeaster, the sailors feared being destroyed. Finding temporary shelter behind the small island of Cauda, they began to take desperate measures. They pulled in the lifeboat, a small boat towed behind the main vessel. It was likely interfering with

steering or in danger of being battered against the ship. Then they used ropes, likely working crosswise in order to support the timbers of the hull. Then, fearing that the boat would be blown all the way to the Greater Syrtis, a long stretch of quicksand off the coast of North Africa, they lowered what Luke records as “the instrument.” As a doctor, he likely didn’t know the exact word to use. It may refer to an anchor but could also refer to the mainsail. When these steps did not work, they began to throw the cargo overboard and then the tackle (spars, planks, and perhaps the yardarm) in order to lighten the ship (Barker, 1890).

27:27-28

In antiquity, the sea around Malta (28:1) was included in the “Sea of Adria” or the “Adriatic Sea,” even though the modern Adriatic does not include the area that far south (BBC, 403).

27:42

In the Roman penal system, if any prisoners escaped, the guards charged with their care would be executed. But Julius wanted Paul to live badly enough that he risked his own life and the lives of all his men. As such, everybody made it safely to shore and Paul’s earlier prediction (Acts 27:22) was fulfilled.

28:1-2

Malta lies 60 miles to the south of Sicily. The crew of the ship settled there for three months until the sailing season opened in late February or early March.

28:13

They set sail on another grain boat from Alexandria, this one bearing the carvings of Castor and Pollux, the twin sons of Zeus (Dioscuri), the guardian deities of sailors. Rhegium was the Italian harbor closest to Sicily, and Puteoli was the main port of Rome.

28:15

Occasionally isolated inns would grow into larger settlements that retained the names of the inns. The Three Taverns was one of these, 33 miles from Rome along the Appian Way. The Forum of

Appius was another small town, 43 miles from Rome on the same paved road (BBC, 405).

28:16

Arriving in Rome, Paul was able to rent a house (v. 30) but had to have a guard with him at all times, perhaps chained to him (v. 20).

28:17-22

In Acts 18:2, we learn that Claudius issued an order expelling all the Jews from Rome. It is apparent that this order had since been rescinded since the Jewish leaders were back in Rome. This reversal might have occurred when Nero became emperor in AD 54.

28:26-27

In making his case before the Jewish leaders, Paul cited Isaiah 6:9-10. This passage was also quoted by Jesus to make a similar point (Matthew 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:39-40).

28:29

The King James Version of the Bible includes verse 29, which reads, “and when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves.” This statement does not appear in the earliest copies of the Bible that have been found, and thus is not included in most modern translations.

28:30

Paul’s time under house arrest did not limit the work he was able to do for the gospel. During this period of captivity, he wrote letters, often referred to as his Prison Letters, to the Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians. He also received many visitors, including Timothy, Tychicus, Epaphroditus, and Mark, who are all mentioned in his various letters. As well, he proclaimed the gospel to all who would hear, including the Roman guard (Philippians 1:13).

28:31

At the end of his two years in Rome, Paul was likely released. After this it is believed that he traveled through Asia Minor, Crete, Greece, and Spain. Eventually he was rearrested and beheaded before Nero (AD 67). He completed the task that was set before him, “testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (20:24) throughout the known world.

Session 6 - Discussion

Introduction

Paul was finally able to take the gospel to Rome, but not before he almost died in a shipwreck at sea. In our lives, we, too, will face seemingly insurmountable circumstances. When we do, we'll need to turn to God and trust that he is able to bring to completion that which he has called us to do.

Discussion Questions

1. Paul and his companions were shipwrecked because of a rash decision by the centurion. When have you made a risky decision that blew up in your face? When have you been caught in the shrapnel of someone else's poor decision?
2. Even after doing everything possible to try and survive the storm, all seemed lost. It is at this point that the sailors were ready to listen to Paul. Why do we turn to God during dire circumstances only after we've exhausted all other avenues? When have you cried out to God as a last resort?
3. It seemed as though all was lost as the ship was pushed farther and farther by the storm. And yet, just when it was darkest, God stepped in and provided hope and the promise of safety. When has God delivered you from seemingly hopeless circumstances?
4. Even when seemingly out of danger on the island of Malta, Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake; yet he suffered no harm—once again displaying how God's favor rested upon this man. When in your life have you felt God's favor upon you?
5. Arriving in Italy, Paul was greatly encouraged by the believers who had come to meet him. How can we as a Christian community be there for one another and encourage one another?
6. Paul finally set foot in Rome, fulfilling his calling to talk with the people there about Jesus. When have you seen God bring something to completion? When have you seen a person or group set out to accomplish something and then, through God's favor, complete the task?

Think About It

Throughout this study of the second half of Acts, we've tracked with Paul and others as they have tirelessly carried the good news about Jesus around the world, telling all who would hear the incredible news that salvation is available to all. To whom is God calling you to take this message?

What Will You Do?

What will you do in the coming months to bring the message of Jesus to this person?

Changing Your Mind

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance! (Acts 28:30-31)

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