

# *Paul's Third Missionary Journey*

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

How have you experienced opposition to the mission of the church in your life? How can you remain bold and stand firm in the face of opposition?

Read Acts 18:23–21:14.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you see how God is calling you to step out of your comfort zone and be bold for the kingdom of God.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Disciples of Jesus share the gospel—the true, complete gospel—even in the face of opposition, regardless of personal danger to themselves.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

In Paul's third missionary journey, he encountered several obstacles—people teaching an incomplete gospel, opposition from the Jews, people trying to use the power of God like magic, riots by those whose business was threatened by the gospel, and real danger for his life and safety in Jerusalem. But the Holy Spirit and the mission of the church prevailed. And Paul remained committed to that mission no matter what. He didn't waver. This is the true meaning of "apostle," one sent on a mission. Everything in his life was about the mission of sharing the gospel and building the church. Nothing else mattered. Do we live our lives that way? Are we fully sold out to the mission of the church to make disciples of all nations? Is that what our life is defined by? Is it the only thing that matters to us? Do our lives really look like it is the only thing that matters, or is that just what we say?

### ✦ MEDITATE

"I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13).

## [GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

**QUESTION** *How have people misunderstood or misconstrued the gospel today?*

**QUESTION** *How have you experienced opposition to the gospel in the world? How have you seen the church prevail against opposition?*

In Paul's third missionary journey, opposition to the gospel really started to heat up, yet God protected Paul and his coworkers through it and even turned it into opportunity for greater witness. The Spirit and the mission were not hindered by the opposition to the gospel. The Holy Spirit will advance the gospel no matter what stands in the way.

### ✦ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In Paul's third missionary journey things started to really heat up as he corrected incomplete teaching, encountered opposition, and traveled to Jerusalem even though it was dangerous for him. The apostles encountered many kinds of struggles—people teaching an incomplete gospel, opposition from the Jews, people trying to use the power of God like magic, riots by those whose business was threatened by the gospel, and real danger for Paul's life and safety in Jerusalem. Yet they continued to persevere. Not once did they give up. They believed the gospel message and the mission of the church was more important than even their own lives.

1. *Correction: Apollos, Ephesians, Sons of Sceva*

2. *Opposition: Jews of Ephesus, Demetrius*

3. *No Fear: Going to Jerusalem*

## [GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 18:23–21:14.

### 1. Correction: Apollos, Ephesians, Sons of Sceva

#### ✦ READ ACTS 18:23–19:20

**QUESTION** *Why did Apollos need more education about the gospel? What were the disciples at Ephesus missing? How are these two related?*

**QUESTION** *What was the problem with what the sons of Sceva were doing?*

In this section we have stories of three different groups of people who had good intentions but who needed correction in their understanding of the gospel. The first two, Apollos and the Ephesian disciples, only knew the baptism of John, not the baptism of Christ. The third group, the sons of Sceva, were trying to use the name of Jesus as a kind of magic trick to drive out evil spirits, which is a good thing to try to do, but they were using the name of Christ when they didn't really know Christ. The common point of all these stories is how easily we can misinterpret or misunderstand the gospel, even when we have the best of intentions, and how important it is for those who preach and teach the gospel to be properly and fully educated before they teach others.

#### **Apollos**

Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, a city on the coast of the Mediterranean in Egypt, northern Africa. At the time, Alexandria was Egypt's capital and its cultural, intellectual, and research center. Alexandria had a massive library and was a hub for scholars from various cultures. This where they first translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek (the Septuagint or LXX) because so many of the Hellenistic Jews could no longer read Hebrew. Scripture tells us that Apollos was a very educated man with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. This makes sense, being from Alexandria. Apollos had been taught about Jesus and spoke accurately with great fervor, except he only knew the baptism of John, meaning he only knew as much as what John the Baptist had taught about Jesus, which was more of a pointing-ahead-to-Jesus kind of gospel than a full understanding of the gospel after Jesus's death and resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Apollos wasn't preaching a false gospel, but he was preaching an incomplete one.

John the Baptist had preached repentance because the kingdom was at hand. His baptism was a water baptism for the forgiveness of sins. But he always pointed ahead to Jesus, who actually brought the kingdom. John said Jesus would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11), which happened at Pentecost (Acts 2). Apollos was teaching accurately about what he knew about Jesus, but he didn't have the full picture of the gospel.

Thankfully, he was teaching in Ephesus, where Paul had left his coworkers, Priscilla and Aquila, to continue ministry there. Priscilla and Aquila had met Paul in Corinth and lived and worked with him for a year and a half, both in the trade of tentmaking and in sharing the gospel (50–52 AD). They went with Paul to Ephesus, where Paul stayed only a little while before returning to Antioch, but Priscilla and Aquila stayed to continue preaching the gospel and building the church there (Acts 18). When Apollos arrived in Ephesus teaching an incomplete gospel, they invited him to their home (where the church in Ephesus met) and taught him the way of God more accurately. Both showed humility and a commitment to the gospel and unity. They didn't make a big scene in the synagogue as if to shame him, and he had the humility to listen to them and be corrected. Their story shows us the importance of mentorship and training in the church, as well as the importance of unity, making sure everyone is preaching the same gospel.

### ***Believers in Ephesus***

Apollos left Ephesus and went to Corinth, and Paul came to Ephesus, where he found some more disciples who only knew of the baptism of John and also had an incomplete understanding of the gospel. He asked if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed, implying that when people accept the gospel and are baptized in Christ, they receive the Holy Spirit at that same time. Some denominations speak of the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" as a separate event that takes place later in your faith journey, like a "next level" Christianity, but here Paul clearly described the Holy Spirit as something that comes with baptism into Christ. The reason these believers had not received the Holy Spirit wasn't because they were waiting for a next level of Christianity but because, like Apollos, they had not known the full gospel, only the baptism of John.

Paul explained the full gospel to them and baptized them in the name of Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were twelve men, the same number as the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples. Some denominations read stories like this in Acts and believe speaking in tongues is the primary evidence of someone having been filled with the Holy Spirit, but even in Acts, the filling of the Spirit was not always accompanied by tongues. When Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans and they received the Spirit, tongues were not mentioned (Acts 8:14–19). Paul told the Corinthians that the Holy Spirit empowers each believer with different spiritual gifts; not everyone speaks in tongues (1 Corinthians 12:1–11). Though it did seem to be common in Acts, it is not the universal indicator of the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's heart.

The evidence of the Spirit is that His fruit is growing in your life—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

### **Sons of Sceva**

A chief priest named Sceva (“left-handed”) had seven sons who traveled around as itinerant exorcists, driving out evil spirits. This is the only place the word “exorcist” is used in Scripture. It comes from the word for “command,” “adjure,” or “charge under oath.” The verb form is used only once too, when the high priest commanded Jesus “under oath by the living God” to tell them if He was the Messiah (Matthew 26:63). When Jesus or His disciples cast out demons in Scripture, this term is not used. This term describes those who try to cast out demons using ritual adjurations, magical incantations, amulets, and secret passwords. First-century Jewish literature describes elaborate rituals invoking the patriarchs, angels, or divine names to expel demons. Ephesus had a reputation for being a center of the magical arts.

These men had heard of Jesus and the power Paul had because of His name, so they tried using His name, too, just like they used other magical spells and the names of angels or gods. The text tells us God had used Paul so powerfully that even handkerchiefs and aprons he had touched were able to heal people. To those who didn’t really know Jesus and understand how the power of the Holy Spirit works, this might sound like magic, but the response of the demon to the command of the sons of Sceva shows us the difference between what the apostles were doing and what these magicians were doing. The apostles weren’t using the name of Jesus like a magic spell; the Holy Spirit was performing miracles through them (Acts 19:11). The Spirit was the one in control, the apostles were just vessels of the Spirit. You can even see the difference in the way they used His name, saying “the Jesus whom Paul preaches.” They didn’t even know Jesus, they had just heard of Him! The evil spirit answered that he knew Jesus and knew about Paul but did not know who they were. Then he attacked and overpowered them all; they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

This story spread all over Ephesus and everyone—both Jews and Greeks—was seized with fear. But the name of Jesus became highly honored and people who had been hiding their faith in Him now openly confessed it. Many who had practiced sorcery publicly burned their magic scrolls, which were valued at 50,000 drachmas. A drachma was a silver coin, about one day’s wage for a day laborer. This amount would have taken the average day laborer 137 years to earn; it was a lot of money.

**QUESTION** *Why is it important for all of us to remain humble enough to be corrected?*

**QUESTION** *Why is practicing magic inconsistent with a life of faith in Jesus?*

**APPLICATION POINT #1** / Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila correcting the incomplete gospel of Apollos and the Ephesian believers shows us how important it is to make sure the gospel being preached in our churches is accurate. There are minor theological issues about which different denominations can agree to disagree, but when it comes to the gospel, we all need to agree if we are going to call ourselves Christians. There are some false teachings—for example, the prosperity gospel, works-righteousness, universalism, and Christian nationalism, to name a few—that are inconsistent with the true gospel. You cannot believe those teachings and still say you believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we hear false teachings that contradict the true gospel, even if the person has good intentions, we need to correct the false teaching and share the true gospel. We also must all be humble enough to be corrected when needed. A wise person welcomes correction because they want to share the truth that truly saves (Proverbs 9:8; 12:15).

**APPLICATION POINT #2** / These stories show us the difference between the way people use magic to try to use divine power for their own purposes and the way the apostles were used by God for His purposes. The difference is not just about demonic power versus the power of God; it's about the intent and the purpose of using that power. Today, we see a lot of people trying to use the power or authority of God for their own purposes instead of His. Our calling is to submit ourselves to the Lord's will to be used by Him in whatever way He leads. But it is also to call attention to those who try to abuse the power and authority of God, to use His name or His church for their own purposes instead of His kingdom.

**QUESTION** *Describe any false or incomplete gospels we encounter today. How can you respond to those gospels and show people the truth?*

**QUESTION** *How do people today try to use God's power or authority for their own purposes instead of submitting to God's will and His purposes? How can we bring these situations to light?*

## 2. *Opposition: Ephesian Jews, Demetrius*

✦ **RE-READ: ACTS 19:8-12 AND READ: ACTS 19:23-41**

**QUESTION** *Why was Demetrius upset with Paul? How did he get others to join him in opposing Paul?*

**QUESTION** *How did the city clerk diffuse the situation and calm down the crowd?*

After Paul laid hands on the Ephesian disciples and they received the Holy Spirit, he spoke boldly in the synagogue for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of the Jews refused to believe and became “obstinate.” This word is “hard-hearted,” which God used in the Old Testament to describe both Pharaoh and, many times, His own people, Israel. In the same way God’s people didn’t listen to His prophets in the Old Testament, they refused to believe the apostles. They also spoke publicly against “the Way.” This is what the Jesus movement was called in the beginning; the Romans considered it to be a sect of Judaism (Acts 24:14). This name refers to Jesus’s statement, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). “The Way” can mean a literal road, that Jesus is the way to the Father and eternal life. But it also shows us this was more than just a belief system, philosophy, or religion; it was a way of life, following Jesus, living like He lived.

Because the Jews in the synagogue rejected his message, Paul went to the Greeks, to the lecture hall of Tyrannus, where teachers and philosophers met to exchange ideas, debate, and discuss everything under the sun. In each town, Paul started with the synagogues but also preached to the Gentiles. Paul led daily discussions in the lecture hall for two years, to the point that all the Jews and Greeks in all of Asia heard the gospel. The major cities in the region of biblical Asia were the churches to which Peter wrote in Revelation, which means by the time of the writing of Revelation (95 AD), each of these cities had well-established churches. Even though he faced opposition from the Jews, it didn’t stop his ministry, it only made it wider. Paul’s ministry was incredibly effective; he spread the gospel to this whole region.

After many people came to faith in Jesus and burned their sorcery scrolls, a silversmith named Demetrius gathered all the craftsmen in Ephesus together because he was worried about what Paul’s ministry was doing to their business. Paul had convinced large numbers of people all over Asia that the idols they made were not really gods at all. Demetrius was worried about his silversmithing business, but to get more people on his side, he also said it was discrediting their local goddess, Artemis, goddess of fertility and life, whose massive and beautiful temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. This not only offended them spiritually, it could affect their economy because so many people traveled to Ephesus to

worship Artemis and participate in their festivals.

The craftsmen became furious and began shouting, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” The whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s coworkers from Macedonia, and brought them into the theater. Acts tells us that Paul wanted to go, but the disciples wouldn’t let him, and even some of the officials of the province begged him not to go. The crowd was in confusion. Everyone was shouting different things. The text says most of the people in the crowd didn’t even know why they were there. This is the definition of mob mentality, following a crowd into an uproar and not even knowing why! The text says they pushed Alexander to the front to defend himself before the people but then proceeded to shout in unison for two hours! This was an intense and chaotic crowd. It felt like something really insane was going to happen, but then the city clerk completely diffused the situation. The city clerk was not just a secretary but the top civic official, who made known the citizen assembly’s rulings and represented the city to the Roman provincial officials headquartered in Ephesus. He quieted the crowd and told them if anyone had a grievance, they needed to bring it up in court, through the proper legal channels, but they were in danger of being charged with rioting the way they were going.

The city clerk was so calm and rational. He told them to go through the proper legal channels if they had a problem, but he also appeased their emotional irrationality. He realized they were riled up; they were upset because of the pride they took in their city. Artemis was a symbol of that to them. He reassured them that the whole world knew Artemis was great. The whole empire knew Ephesus was great. They had no reason to be threatened by these people. Then, to make sure they really settled down, he added that they could be accused of rioting, which could lead to Roman disciplinary measures against their city. We don’t know if the city clerk was a friend of Paul, a sympathizer to their cause, a believer himself, or truly just trying to squash a riot in his town, but his words stopped the riot before any of the disciples were hurt as they had been in other places.

**QUESTION** *What does this story show us about the dangers of mob mentality?*

**QUESTION** *How are we as Christians called to diffuse volatile situations and speak truth into the “riots”?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / There can be a lot of mob-mentality type situations in our world today too, even within the church. This can happen in person, but it seems to happen a lot on social media. People see something and share it immediately without finding out all the facts, get people all riled up, and before you know it, there is essentially a riot. And a lot of times, just like this crowd in Ephesus, we don’t really know exactly what we’re riled up about. As Christians, we are called to be wise and discerning about

information that comes our way, not jump to conclusions or get swept up in outrage. When there is a riot type of situation, we are called to speak calm, rational truth into the situation, to diffuse it. Not to spread gossip, stir the pot, or fan the flame of outrage but calmly and wisely seek truth and speak truth into volatile situations.

**QUESTION** *How have you experienced being swept up in this kind of mob mentality? How did you respond?*

**QUESTION** *How can we know how to seek the truth when everyone around us is riled up?*

### *3. Paul: No Fear to Go to Jerusalem*

#### **✦ READ ACTS 20:1-21:14**

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul want to go to Jerusalem? Why didn't the Ephesian elders and the disciples in Caesarea want him to go?*

**QUESTION** *What did Paul consider more important than his own safety? Why?*

This next section describes Paul's desire to go to Jerusalem despite the fact that many people said it was dangerous for him there. First, there is a brief story about an amazing miracle in Troas. When Paul left Ephesus, he went to Greece for three months. He found out that some Jews were plotting against him, so he went back a different way through Macedonia to Troas, and other coworkers met him there. Paul was speaking one night until after midnight because he planned on leaving the next day, and he wanted to make sure he got it all in. A young man named Eutychus ("fortunate") was sitting in a window, fell asleep, fell down three stories from the window, and died. Paul threw himself on him, put his arms around him, and he was healed. This is significant as an opening to this section, where Paul showed no fear of persecution and death because he knew God could raise him from the dead if He wanted to, but God also might be calling him to die, and he was okay with that too. For Paul, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

Paul left on foot the next day, his coworkers left by boat, and they met up later. The text tells us Paul was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost, but he stopped at Miletus, where he called the Ephesian elders to meet with him before he entered Jerusalem. Paul believed he was entering a dangerous situation and would never see these beloved friends again. He reminded them that when he was with them, he had served the Lord with great humility and tears in spite of opposition from the Jews. He did not hesitate to teach and preach and declare to both Jews and Greeks to repent and turn back to God through faith in Jesus. He had never shown fear of persecution, but at times in his missionary journeys he had escaped a certain town or gone a different way to avoid danger, not out of fear, but because the Spirit led him to do so (Acts 9:23–25, 29–30; 14:5–6; 17:5–10, 13–15; 18:12–17; 20:3).

But now the Spirit was compelling him to go to Jerusalem, even though he believed it would be dangerous. At this point, he said the Holy Spirit warned him that prison and hardships were facing him in every city, but he considered his life worth nothing to him. His only aim was to finish the mission God had given him, to testify to the gospel of grace. About three years later (61 AD), Paul would write Philippians from prison in Rome and say he wanted to die and be with Jesus, but if God still had plans for him to continue his mission on earth, he would stay (Philippians 1:20–26). Not that he had a death wish, just that whether he lived or died was about Jesus—“to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

These were Paul’s final words to these friends:

- He declared himself “innocent of the blood of any of you,” meaning he did all he could to preach the gospel to them. If any of them were not saved, it was not his fault. Paul preached the gospel to everyone he could, but he recognized he wasn’t responsible for the way people responded. We plant seeds and water seeds, but God causes the growth (1 Corinthians 3:1–9).
- Paul charged them to keep watch over themselves and their flock like good shepherds, as Jesus would (1 Peter 5:1–4). He warned them that “wolves” would attack their flock; even people from within the church would distort the truth to draw people away to follow them instead of Jesus. So, he told them to be on guard. This is spiritual warfare language—stand firm, be on guard, be ready to defend the truth and stand firm on the gospel (2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Ephesians 6:10–18).
- He declared that his heart was pure in his ministry. He didn’t covet anyone’s money. He supplied his own needs as a tentmaker. He was generous to the needy and showed them by the way he lived that we must help the weak, proving Jesus’s words by his life, that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Then he knelt down, and they all prayed together. They embraced him, kissed him, and wept. These were his precious children in the faith, people he dearly loved who dearly loved him. Paul was not just an

evangelist who swept through town and preached the gospel to huge crowds and moved on. He was a spiritual father to them. He had deep, intimate relationships with those he disciplined (1 Thessalonians 2:1–12). The text says Paul and his coworkers had to tear themselves away from them.

On the way to Jerusalem, they stayed in Tyre for seven days, and the disciples there urged him not to go to Jerusalem. Tyre and Sidon were cities just north of Israel, whom the Jews believed to be enemies of God who would be judged in the final judgment (Isaiah 23; Jeremiah 25; Ezekiel 26–28). Jesus said the day of judgment would be worse for the Jewish cities who had rejected His gospel, saying if Tyre and Sidon had seen the miracles He had done in Galilee, they would have believed (Matthew 11:20–22). He was right; here they were with a group of believers in Tyre.

They continued to Ptolemais and Caesarea, where they stayed with Philip, one of the original seven deacons in the church at Jerusalem who went out and witnessed in Samaria after Stephen was stoned (Acts 8–10). Philip had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. After a few days, another prophet, Agabus, came from Judea and prophesied that the Jewish leaders would bind Paul in Jerusalem and hand him over to the Gentiles (Roman government). The disciples pleaded with Paul not to go, but he said he was ready not only to be bound, but to die for the name of Jesus. They gave up and said, “The Lord’s will be done.”

**QUESTION** *Put yourself in Paul’s shoes, knowing you were in danger of persecution anywhere you went. What would you do?*

**QUESTION** *What does Paul’s attitude tell us about what he believed?*

**APPLICATION POINT #1** / Paul had no fear about dying for the gospel. He didn’t recklessly seek out death. There were times he avoided going to dangerous places because he felt the Spirit wasn’t leading him there yet, but he was pretty sure his story would end in martyrdom for his faith. All the original apostles felt this way. This tells us that they 100% believed that what they were preaching was true. No one would willingly die for a lie they made up. They also believed sharing the gospel was urgently important because they believed it was a matter of eternal life or death for people. Is this the way we feel about the gospel? If we really believed people who don’t know Jesus don’t enter the kingdom of heaven, wouldn’t we have a more urgent desire to share the gospel? No matter the personal cost to ourselves?

**APPLICATION POINT #2** / Paul’s ministry was deeply relational, just like Jesus’s ministry. He didn’t just preach to big crowds from an ivory tower or a pedestal. He lived in deep, intimate relationships with people in a community that was more like a family. He was a spiritual father to these people, not only

sharing the gospel but sharing his very life with them. Is this what our church communities look like? Are our churches like big extended families who love and support one another and live in community as one? Do our pastors operate as spiritual fathers who live life in authentic community with their spiritual children, not just distant speakers up on a stage?

**QUESTION** *Describe those in your life whom you see as completely “sold out for the gospel,” people who aren’t afraid to share the gospel and witness, no matter the personal cost to themselves. How do they do it in a way that is powerful and effective? What kind of impact do they have on the world around them?*

**QUESTION** *Reflect on your church community. In what ways does it operate as one big family? How is everyone included in that family?*

## [NEXT STEPS]

This section shows us that disciples remain committed to the mission of the church, to make disciples of all nations, no matter what obstacles they face. This week focus on how God is leading you to pursue the mission of the church. Wake up each morning and ask Him to show you how you can make disciples that day. Ask Him to give you opportunities to share the gospel and power and wisdom to face opposition. Then face each day focused solely on the mission of the church and living missionally all day, in every circumstance.

## [PRAY]

*+Pray for the mission of the church, for the gospel to be advanced around the world, unhindered by whatever opposition may come its way. Pray for the Lord to use any obstacles as a way to spread the gospel farther and wider. Pray for your own life to be used to fulfill His mission in the world in whatever way God sees fit.*