

# ACTS

Part Two









# ACTS

*Part Two*





# *Becoming a Christian*

In the Bible, God reveals His truth about how to have eternal life by becoming a believer in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The believer is a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, a true child of God, and one who has been saved by God according to God's grace (undeserved favor). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9).

## **HOW DOES ONE BECOME A CHRISTIAN?**

The Bible, God's word, says that eternal life (salvation) is a free gift of God which cannot be earned or deserved (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8–9).

However, we also find in God's word that all people are born sinners and cannot save themselves from the penalty of sin, which is eternal death and separation from God. God's requirement is perfection and no one is perfect (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:3–23; Ephesians 2:1–4).

God tells us in His word that He is holy, meaning that He is perfect and that He is also just, meaning that He gives to sinners what is deserved, and because of His holiness and justice He must punish sinners. But thankfully, the Bible also says that God is loving and merciful and does not take pleasure in punishing sinners (Exodus 34:6–7; Ephesians 2:4–5).

God has mercy on sinners by not giving them what they deserve. This is only possible because He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the God-man, to be the substitute for sinners bearing the penalty for their sin and satisfying God's justice (John 1:1,14; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 5:8).

Jesus said that in order for anyone to have eternal life there must be repentance of sins and faith placed in His substitutionary death on the cross to pay for the penalty of one's sins. This faith must be in Jesus Christ alone, not depending on anything else including "good works" (Mark 1:15b; Acts 20:21; Ephesians 2:8–9).

## **WHAT THEN IS THE RESPONSE TO THESE THINGS IF ONE DESIRES TO HAVE ETERNAL LIFE AND BECOME A CHRISTIAN?**

1. Pray and ask God to forgive you. The Bible says that you must repent of your sins, being ashamed of them, genuinely regretting and grieving over them, and firmly deciding to make an about-face and turn away from sin and your old lifestyle (Acts 3:19–20).

2. Pray and tell God that you place your faith in Jesus Christ alone to save you. The Bible says that for you to become a Christian, you must place your faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross to become your substitute and who took the penalty for your sin upon Himself once and for all (John 3:36).





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# *Paul's First Missionary Journey*

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

How have you seen people sharing the gospel boldly, regardless of the personal cost to themselves? How have you seen people suffer or be persecuted for the gospel?

Read Acts 13–14.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand the cost that comes with following Jesus and give you a passion for sharing the gospel to the ends of the earth regardless of the personal cost.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Ambassadors for Christ have a passion and boldness to preach the gospel regardless of the cost to themselves.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Paul and Barnabas were willing to endure anything to share the gospel to the ends of the earth. They endured much suffering for the gospel; this missionary journey was only the beginning. On their way back to Antioch, they went back to the churches they had planted and encouraged the believers there to continue in the faith, saying it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God. Jesus told His disciples if they wanted to be His disciples, they had to “pick up your cross” and follow Him, that if you want to save your life you have to lose it (Matthew 16:24–26). He told us to count the cost of being His disciple (Luke 14:28). Peter said that as much as we partake in Christ’s sufferings, we will share in His glory (1 Peter 4:13). Paul told the Philippians that his ultimate desire was to know Christ and the fellowship of His sufferings (Philippians 3:10). He told the Romans that, as God’s children, we are coheirs with Christ; if we suffer with Him, we will be glorified with Him (Romans 8:17). The theme of suffering like Christ is all over Scripture. And yet most American Christians today don’t experience suffering or persecution the way Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and the other disciples did. For the early Christians, persecution and potential martyrdom were very real possibilities. Though our suffering may look different, the call to serve others

selflessly and sacrificially, as Jesus did, does not. Self-denial and a willingness to bear one's cross is a daily commitment to live out the sacrificial love exemplified by Christ.

## ✚ MEDITATE

"Men, why are you doing these things? 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 and the sea and all that is in them" (Acts 14:15).

## [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 you seen or experienced suffering or persecution for the gospel in your life? Why does following Jesus come with suffering and sacrifice?*

**QUESTION** *How does your life point people to follow Jesus, not yourself?*

In Acts 13–14, Paul and Barnabas set out on their first missionary journey. They had great success in Cyprus, then hit opposition from jealous Jewish leaders when they got to Galatia. Though many Jews and Gentiles came to faith in Jesus, the Jewish leaders followed them to Lystra, where the people misunderstood their miracles and tried to worship them as gods. Then the Jews who had followed them stoned Paul. But God healed him, and he continued to Derbe and then back to all those cities to encourage the believers to endure through suffering for the gospel. These stories show us Paul and Barnabas's commitment to share the gospel "to the ends of the earth" even through suffering and struggle, whether their message was well received or not. Through it all, their attitude was humility, always pointing to Christ instead of themselves. As ambassadors for Christ, we should have the same passion for sharing the gospel, willingness to suffer for the gospel, and humility in pointing to Christ alone.

## ✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

*+This section details Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey throughout Cyprus (where Barnabas was from) and several towns north of there in the southern part of Galatia, which was northwest of Paul's hometown of Tarsus. In Acts 13, they witnessed all over Cyprus, including to the proconsul, who was amazed by their teaching and became a follower of Jesus. Then they traveled to Antioch of Pisidia, where*

Paul preached first to the Jews, who initially liked his message. But when they saw the great crowds who came the next week, the Jewish leaders were jealous and began to argue with him. Paul told them he would turn his focus to the Gentiles, and they stirred up persecution against him and Barnabas and drove them out of their district. In Acts 14, at Iconium, both Jews and Gentiles believed, but some unbelieving Jews stirred up the people against them and tried to stone them, so they fled to Lystra, where Paul healed a crippled man and the people tried to worship them as gods. But then Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and succeeded in stoning Paul this time. God healed him, and he went with Barnabas to Derbe, where more people came to faith in Jesus. They visited all the places where they had shared the gospel, appointing elders in each church, and then returned to Antioch.

1. *Cyprus: The Proconsul*
2. *Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium: The Shift to the Gentiles*
3. *Lystra: The Stoning of Paul*

## [GOING DEEPER]

+This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 13–14.

### 1. *Cyprus: The Proconsul*

#### ✚ READ ACTS 13:1–12

**QUESTION** *How did the prophets and teachers at Antioch follow the leading of the Holy Spirit? Where else do you see the Holy Spirit guiding His people in this story?*

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul condemn the magician Elymas to blindness?*

This section begins the transition from Judea and Samaria to “the ends of the earth.” The story shifts from following Peter and the disciples and deacons from Jerusalem to following Paul and his coworkers. The “center” of the church also shifts from Jerusalem to Antioch, reflecting a shift from a primarily Jewish body of Christ to a mixed Jewish and Gentile body. This is seen clearly by the opening of Acts 13, which describes the diversity of the leaders of the church at Antioch.

As we learned in our last lesson, Antioch was a large city with an eclectic mix of ethnicities. But the city was intentionally built to keep them separate, each in their own communities. This is what made the church

shockingly different. In the church at Antioch, these different ethnicities joined together as one body and became a community no longer defined by their ethnic identity but by their allegiance to Christ and His kingdom. The five leaders mentioned here reflected the diversity of the church as a whole. Paul and Barnabas were Hellenized Jews. Manaen grew up in the household of Herod the Great as a close friend, like a brother, of Herod Antipas. Lucius of Cyrene, a Greek city in North Africa, was one of the founders of the church who had come from Cyprus and Cyrene to preach to the Hellenists there (Acts 11:20). Simeon was called “Niger,” which meant “black”; he was also from Africa, with very dark skin.

As they were worshipping and fasting, the Holy Spirit told them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the missionary work Jesus called Paul to from his conversion, so they laid hands on them and sent them off. Throughout Acts, we see many moments like this, where the Holy Spirit spoke to them with specific instructions and the apostles obeyed without question. Though the book is traditionally called “Acts of the Apostles,” it could be called “Acts of the Holy Spirit.”

At this point, the church had been around about thirteen years, and Paul had been a Christian for about twelve years. Barnabas was part of the original church in Jerusalem; he was mentioned as one of those who sold his field and gave the money to the church (33 AD). Barnabas was a nickname that means “son of encouragement.” His original name was Joseph; he was a Levite (the tribe of priests and servants of the temple) from Cyprus, which means he was a Hellenistic Jew. He was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24). Paul was called both Saul (Hebrew for “desired”) and Paul, his Roman name (“small”). This dual name reflected his dual citizenship; he was both a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” trained as a Pharisee under the famous rabbi Gamaliel, and a Roman citizen.

After Paul was converted (34 AD), he preached in Arabia and Damascus for three years before he went to Jerusalem, where the disciples at first feared him until Barnabas defended him (37 AD). When the Jews tried to persecute Paul, he fled to his hometown of Tarsus, where he preached the gospel in Syria and Cilicia for about seven years, when Barnabas came to get him to help him minister to the new believers in Antioch (44 AD). The church there had grown very quickly when some men of Cyprus and Cyrene had come to preach not just to the Jews but also to the Hellenists, and when the disciples in Jerusalem heard of it, they sent Barnabas (who was from Cyprus) there to exhort them. A great many were added to the church, so Barnabas retrieved Paul from Tarsus to help him. When a prophet predicted a famine, Paul and Barnabas took a collection to Jerusalem, then returned to Antioch with John Mark, the young man whose mother’s home was where the church had been praying when Peter escaped prison (46 AD). He was also Barnabas’s cousin (Colossians 4:10).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All of these dates are approximate, pieced together from Acts 9-12 and Galatians 1-2  
ESV Study Bible online resources - <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart-44-06/#chart-44-06-star-1>

Barnabas, Paul, and John Mark went to Cyprus, where Barnabas grew up. Cyprus is a small island in the Mediterranean, just south of Paul's hometown of Tarsus and just west of Antioch. They went to all the towns throughout the island, preaching in the synagogues. At their last stop, the proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus (the same name as Paul), "a man of intelligence," asked for Barnabas and Paul because he wanted to hear the gospel. A consul was a Roman magistrate, appointed by the Roman Senate and given absolute authority over a particular area of the Roman Republic as the head of state. A consul's term was typically one year; a proconsul was one whose term had been extended beyond that.

A Jewish magician and false prophet named Bar-Jesus ("son of" Jesus or Joshua), or Elymas ("wise" in Arabic; "powerful" in Aramaic), was an advisor to Paulus and sought to turn him away from the faith. But Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him, called him "son of the devil" and "enemy of all righteousness, full of deceit and villainy" and rhetorically asked, "Will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?" The Greek "stop" is a play on words of the name Paul/Paulus. Then Paul told him God was making him blind, like He had done to Paul on the road to Damascus. However, we never see Elymas turn to Jesus like Paul did. Elymas was immediately struck blind, and the proconsul believed the gospel, not only because of this miracle but also because he was astonished at their teaching.

Before this story, Acts refers to Paul as Saul ("desired"), which was also the name of the first king of Israel (from the same tribe of Benjamin), whom the people desired as king because he was tall, strong, and handsome. After this story, Acts refers to him as Paul ("little"), the opposite of Saul's height and strength, which reflects God's desire for humble leaders in His kingdom.

**QUESTION** *Why is it significant that a "man of intelligence" was astonished at their teaching and chose to follow Jesus? What does this tell us about the gospel?*

**QUESTION** *What kind of impact would the proconsul becoming a follower of Jesus have made on Cyprus?*

**APPLICATION POINT #1/** As God's people, we are to follow the Holy Spirit. He may not speak to us verbally like He did in Acts, but we can hear still His voice today.

**APPLICATION POINT #2/** Scripture talks about the wisdom of God sounding like foolishness to the world (1 Corinthians 1:25), but to this very intelligent and powerful Roman, their teaching sounded amazing. The gospel may be hard to understand for people whose hearts are hardened and whose eyes are blinded, but it makes sense intellectually. You don't have to check your intelligence at the door to follow Jesus. Many atheists criticize Christians for "ignoring reason" to choose faith, but that's not true. For many, like C. S. Lewis, Lew Wallace, Lee Stroebel, and Frank Morison, it was their intellect and reason that led

them to really study the historical evidence, find the gospel to be true, and follow Jesus.

**QUESTION** *How has the voice of the Holy Spirit guided you? How do you know when it is the Holy Spirit and not some other voice?*

**QUESTION** *Reflect on times you have heard (or thought yourself) that you had to reject faith to seem intelligent or reject your intellect to follow Jesus. Why did you/they think that? How have you used your intellect to follow Jesus, study Scripture, and grow in faith?*

## 2. Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium: The Shift to the Gentiles

### ✚ READ ACTS 13:13-14:7

**QUESTION** *What did Paul say about Jesus in his sermon at Antioch of Pisidia?*

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul and Barnabas say they were turning to the Gentiles in Antioch of Pisidia?*

In this section, Paul and his companions went to Perga in Pamphylia. There John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. Scripture doesn't say why he left, but we learn later that Paul considered it a desertion and no longer trusted John Mark; he didn't want to take him on their second missionary journey (Acts 15:38). Paul and Barnabas got into such a heated argument over it that they split up; Paul took Silas, Barnabas took John Mark, and they went separate ways.

Paul and Barnabas went on to Antioch of Pisidia without John Mark. This second Antioch is north of Cyprus, in modern day Turkey. Both cities were established by Seleucus Nicator and named after his father Antiochus. This Antioch was strategically situated on a plateau in the Taurus Mountains, providing a natural defense and a vantage point over the region. As a Roman colony, it enjoyed certain privileges, including self-governance and exemption from some taxes, which attracted a diverse population.

On the Sabbath, they went to the synagogue, and the rulers asked them to share a "word of encouragement," which was fitting, as Barnabas means "son of encouragement." Paul proceeded to give one of most detailed sermons in Acts: the history of God choosing Israel and making them His people and giving them

the land; how, after the judges, they asked for a king and God first gave them Saul, then David, “a man after my heart, who will do my will.” Then he declared that Jesus, a son of David, was the Savior God had promised them. Paul described the death and resurrection of Jesus and how He knew no corruption, so that through Him forgiveness of sin had come, and everyone who believes in Him is “freed from everything which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.” This sermon was specifically for the Jews, as they were in the synagogue. Afterward, the people begged them to speak again the next Sabbath, and many Jews and proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas.

On the next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathered to hear the word. But this time, the Jews saw the crowds who had come to hear Paul and Barnabas, and the very people who a week before had begged them to teach them more were filled with jealousy and argued with Paul. Paul and Barnabas condemned them because they had rejected the gospel, they were now turning to the Gentiles. In this instance, because the Jews had rejected their message, they shifted their focus to the Gentiles. In every city they visited on all their missionary journeys, this and future ones, Paul and his companions preached in the synagogues first, because the Jews knew the story of God’s relationship with Israel, the promised Messiah, etc. Then they preached to the Gentiles in the marketplace.

Paul and Barnabas shook the dust off their feet as they left the district. This was something Jews typically did when leaving a Gentile area to return to Jewish lands so they wouldn’t bring Gentile dust into their holy land. But Jesus told His disciples to do this also with Jewish cities that rejected the message of the gospel. This demonstrated that God’s people were not defined by ethnicity but by faith in the gospel (Mark 6:11).

Then they went to the nearby town of Iconium, where a great number of both Jews and Gentiles believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles against them. They stayed a long time there, preaching boldly and doing signs and wonders, but the city was divided, some for them and some against. When an attempt was made by both Jews and Gentiles to stone them, Paul and Barnabas fled to Lystra, another nearby city.

**QUESTION** *Why did these Jewish leaders turn against Paul and Barnabas on the second Sabbath?*

**QUESTION** *What was the result of their jealousy? What happened to the Jewish leaders? What happened to the rest of their community?*



**APPLICATION POINT** / These Jewish leaders initially received Paul and Barnabas's message with excitement, but when they saw the crowds they drew (both Jew and Gentile), they were filled with jealousy and spoke out against them. Instead of being happy that so many people were hearing the message of salvation, they were jealous that someone was gaining a greater following than them. This even caused them to miss salvation for themselves and caused many others not to come to salvation in Jesus.

This is in stark contrast to Paul, who later said that even if other people preached the gospel out of envy or rivalry, he would rejoice that the gospel had been preached (Philippians 1:15–18). And he didn't care if people followed him, Peter, Apollos, or any other leader; none of them mattered; they were all just servants of Christ, and that's who he wanted people to follow (1 Corinthians 3). The difference is in the attitude.

We may see jealousy and rivalry between leaders in the church today. People get jealous when someone listens to another preacher or goes to another church instead of being thankful that person is being fed. Or a pastor may be jealous of another pastor who has a bigger church or bigger following on social media instead of being thankful that person is impacting people for the gospel. Churches in the same town may seem competitive instead of cooperative, as the body of Christ should be. People seem more focused on you following them instead of Christ. These attitudes are not Christlike and can even lead people away from salvation. Instead of being jealous or comparing crowd sizes or number of followers, those who preach Christ should be thankful when someone else's ministry is successful, because it means the gospel is being preached and more people are being saved! We should work cooperatively with other churches to grow the kingdom of God instead of seeing each other as competition for growing our individual churches.

**QUESTION** *How has jealousy and competition between churches or ministries hurt the spread of the gospel and the growth of the kingdom?*

**QUESTION** *How can we work cooperatively with other churches in our area to build the kingdom of God together? How can we encourage other churches and ministries instead of being jealous or competitive with them?*

### 3. Lystra: The Stoning of Paul

#### ✚ READ ACTS 14:8–28

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul heal the crippled man? How did the Lycaonians respond?*

**QUESTION** *Why did the Jews stone Paul? What happened when the disciples gathered around him?*

When Paul and Barnabas fled the Jews in Iconium, they went to nearby Lystra to continue to preach the gospel. There Paul healed a man, who was crippled from birth, because he saw that he had “faith to be made well.” But the crowds had an interesting reaction. Instead of praising the God Paul had been preaching, they worshipped Paul and Barnabas, calling them Zeus and Hermes come down in human form. Zeus is the chief god of Greek mythology, and Hermes is the herald of the gods, which is who they called Paul because he did the speaking. The priest of Zeus even brought sacrifices to offer to them.

Paul and Barnabas vehemently rejected this idea, tearing their garments and shouting that they were just human beings like them, bringing them the good news of Jesus. This is another stark contrast to the Jewish leaders in Pisidia, who were jealous at the great following they had. Paul and Barnabas didn’t want a following for themselves; they pointed only to Christ. Paul encouraged them to turn away from these “vain things” (false gods like Zeus and Hermes) to follow “the living God, who made the heaven and the earth.”

But Jews had followed them from Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium and riled up the crowds against Paul and Barnabas. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, leaving him for dead. The crowds went from worshipping Paul to stoning him based only on the Jews’ persuasion! They must have been really persuasive!

In 2 Corinthians, Paul described the suffering he had endured for the gospel, which God said would happen to him from the moment he was converted/called to ministry (Acts 9:16). Paul was imprisoned, flogged, and exposed to death again and again. Five times he was given thirty-nine lashes by the Jews; beaten three times with rods; stoned once; shipwrecked three times; spent a night and day at open sea; was constantly on the move and in danger from rivers, bandits, Jews, Gentiles, and false prophets; was in danger in the city, in the country, and at sea. He had labored and toiled and gone without food, water, and sleep; been cold and naked; and constantly faced the pressure of concern for the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23–28). This is the story of his stoning.

The crowd stoned him so severely that if he wasn't actually dead, they believed he was. He was certainly at least unconscious. He would have been bruised, bloodied, and broken. But when the disciples gathered around him, he "rose up" and walked back to the city. This is the language of resurrection. Even if this wasn't a complete resurrection (if he was only unconscious and not actually dead), it was still a miraculous, immediate healing because the next day, he was healthy and strong enough to travel with Barnabas to Derbe, where they preached the gospel and made many disciples. Then they went back to the places they had been persecuted—Lystra, where he had just been stoned, and Iconium and Antioch, where they had threatened to stone them—and encouraged the believers there to continue in the faith, that through "many tribulations" we must enter the kingdom of God. For the disciples at the time, suffering and persecution for the sake of the gospel were a physical reality and one they endured with joy because they considered it a privilege to suffer for the gospel (Acts 5:41; Philippians 1:29).

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church and consecrated them to leadership with prayer and fasting. Then they returned to all the other towns they had visited in Cyprus and then back to Antioch, where they told the church all God had done.

**QUESTION** *How did Paul suffer for the gospel? What was his attitude about it?*

**QUESTION** *Imagine you were a new believer in one of these cities, having witnessed Paul and Barnabas's physical suffering for the gospel. How would you feel? How would their encouragement to continue in the faith impact you?*

**QUESTION** *What does it tell us about the gospel that people were excited to follow Jesus even though it meant physical suffering? Would you respond with excitement if you knew you had to endure physical suffering and persecution to follow Jesus?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Paul and Barnabas were committed to preaching the gospel no matter what, through any kind of suffering or persecution the world threw their way. Though there were times they fled an area because of persecution, when they were beaten, imprisoned, or persecuted, they endured it with faith and even joy because they knew their current suffering was nothing compared to the glory of their inheritance in heaven (Romans 8:18), and they knew the gospel was being spread through their suffering. Do we have that same attitude toward suffering? Are we willing to endure true persecution for our faith? Do we see it as a privilege to suffer for the gospel? Or are we not even willing to go outside our comfort zone for the gospel?

**QUESTION** *You may not be faced with physical persecution like stoning or prison, but what might it look like for you to live a life of suffering, sacrifice, or struggle for the gospel?*

**QUESTION** *How does suffering connect you more deeply to Jesus?*

## [NEXT STEPS]

This section shows us Paul and Barnabas's wholehearted commitment to sharing the gospel "to the ends of the earth," even if it meant physical pain and suffering, sacrifice, discomfort, and rejection. This week, reflect on ways you can step outside your comfort zone to share the gospel with someone who is different from you, far from God, and/or outside your normal circles of influence. Reflect on ways this might be difficult for you and how you can find the boldness to endure whatever may come your way to share the gospel.

## [PRAY]

Jim Elliott was a young missionary who felt called to move to Ecuador to reach the savage native tribe of the Auca, a tribe feared by all the other tribes and who had never heard the gospel. After five years of missionary work and finally befriendng three of the Auca, a group from that tribe killed the five men of their missionary team. Jim was only 28; his only child, a daughter, was only ten months old.

But the missionaries didn't give up. After a great outpouring of prayer, Jim's wife Elizabeth took their daughter, along with the sister of Nate Saint, another missionary who had been killed, and went to live among the Auca tribe with the help of an Auca woman who had accepted Christ. Later, Nate Saint's son also lived with the Auca tribe who had killed his father. Many of the Auca became Christians, including those who had murdered their loved ones.

***"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose"***

—Jim Elliott

+Use the following prayer of Jim Elliott for strength and passion to share the gospel no matter the personal cost to yourself.

***"God, I pray Thee, light these idle sticks of my life and may I burn up for Thee. Consume my life, my God, for it is Thine. I seek not a long life but a full one, like you, Lord Jesus." Amen.***

# *The First Church Council*

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

How have you seen church people work through conflict in a healthy way that leads to deeper unity?  
How have you seen church people let conflicts divide them?

Read Acts 15.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand the importance of maintaining church unity and seeking God's will together.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The church should work hard to be unified as one body, both on important doctrinal issues and in personal relationships.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

The theological disagreement in this story was the question of whether Gentiles had to follow Jewish law to be saved. In Galatians, Paul talked about this conflict and was adamant that they could not give in on this issue. It was not a minor issue; it is essential to the gospel. To teach that Gentiles had to be circumcised and follow Jewish law to follow Jesus was to teach "a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6–10). He felt so strongly about it that he rebuked Peter to his face in Antioch for not eating with the Gentiles while those of the circumcision party were visiting from Jerusalem (Galatians 2:11–14). He said it didn't make any difference that James and Peter were pillars of the church; he would not give in to them for a moment on this issue (Galatians 2:5–6). Yet, Paul and Barnabas also believed it was important for them to be unified with the Jerusalem apostles on every essential gospel issue. They could agree to disagree about non-essential issues like whether to eat meat or drink alcohol (Romans 14), but they had to agree on essential gospel issues, or they couldn't call themselves Christians.

Paul wrote extensively about the importance of unity in the church. He didn't want people following different pastors or leaders, but everyone, including the leaders, following Christ (1 Corinthians 1:11–13). He said the church should have no divisions among them (1 Corinthians 1:10). We are all members of the same body with Christ as the head (1 Corinthians 12). It's strange, then, that he allowed a personal conflict with John Mark to come between him and Barnabas in this chapter right after they had worked so hard to be unified with the apostles theologically. This just shows us that everyone has times when they don't handle conflict well, even our strongest leaders. The Jerusalem Council showed us the right way to handle conflict in the church—listen to each other and seek the Lord's guidance together.

## ✚ MEDITATE

"Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:10–11).

## [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 you seen church people talk through issues about which they disagree, really listen to one another, and seek what God says about it together? When have you seen church people let conflicts or disagreements divide them?*

**QUESTION** *Does the Holy Spirit lead us to greater unity or greater division?*

In Acts 15, we see Paul and Barnabas working hard to maintain unity with the apostles in Jerusalem without compromising a major core tenet of the faith, an essential issue about which we can't just agree to disagree and still call ourselves Christians. But immediately afterward, they allowed a personal conflict to separate them. The difference between the two stories is that in the first one, where they maintained unity, they focused on what God said about the issue and how He was working in the church, not just their own thoughts, feelings, or perspectives. In the second story, there is no mention of seeking God's will or listening to the Holy Spirit's guidance. This chapter shows us that the right way to handle conflict in the church is to seek God's guidance together. When we do that, the Holy Spirit will always lead us to greater unity, not division.

## ✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+This section has two stories that deal with unity in the church. The first story details the first church council in Jerusalem, where all the church leaders met to discuss a theological disagreement and come to a consensus on the official stance of the church. The church leaders worked hard to maintain unity without sacrificing truth. They didn't compromise. They didn't split into separate denominations because they couldn't agree. They discussed it and sought the Lord's will together because they prioritized both unity and truth. In the second story, two of those leaders, who had been very close co-workers, got into a sharp disagreement and didn't work through it together or seek the Lord's will on it, but parted ways.

The theological issue had been a conflict since they first started reaching out to Gentiles—whether Gentiles had to be circumcised and follow other Jewish customs to be saved. In verses 1–21, Paul and Barnabas came to Jerusalem to discuss the issue with the leaders there. In verses 22–35, the Council wrote an official letter detailing their decision. But in verses 36–40, Paul and Barnabas, faithful friends and coworkers for decades, had such a sharp disagreement that they parted ways. This wasn't theological, it was personal. Paul no longer trusted John Mark and didn't want to take him on their trip to encourage the churches. It is strange that they would work so hard to remain unified on theological issues but separate over a personal one. It shows us that even the apostles had moments of conflict and weakness.

1. *The Jerusalem Council*
2. *The Council's Letter to the Gentiles*
3. *Paul and Barnabas Separate*

### [GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 15.

## 1. *The Jerusalem Council*

## ✚ READ ACTS 15:1-21

**QUESTION** What did those of the “party of the Pharisees” teach about circumcision?

**QUESTION** What evidence did Paul, Barnabas, and Peter use to show them they were wrong?

At the end of the last chapter, Paul and Barnabas had returned from a very successful first missionary journey witnessing to both Jews and Gentiles throughout the island of Cyprus and the mainland of Galatia and Pamphylia. But there was already a growing conflict between the Jews and the Gentiles, and a dangerous false teaching was spreading quickly, even to the churches they had just planted (Galatians 1:6–7).

Paul and Barnabas were back at Antioch. Then “certain people” came from Judea and taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved. In Galatians, Paul called them the “circumcision party” (Galatians 2:12). Here in Acts, Luke called them “the party of the Pharisees” (v. 5). Paul and Barnabas argued adamantly with them in Antioch, and the church leaders appointed Paul, Barnabas, and others to go to Jerusalem and ask the apostles and elders there about this question, since these men had come from Jerusalem.

This issue had already been discussed several times in the church’s short history, about fifteen years at this point. Each time it seemed the issue had been settled, and yet this circumcision party kept teaching it. In Acts 11:1–3, shortly after Peter’s vision, the circumcision party criticized him for eating with Gentiles. He told them about his vision and God’s word to him that He shows no partiality between Jew and Gentiles but accepts everyone from any nation who fears Him and does what is right (Acts 10:34–35). Later, Paul and Peter had had a conflict about the same issue.<sup>1</sup> They were at the church in Antioch when “certain men” from the circumcision party in Jerusalem came, and Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles. Paul confronted him for his hypocrisy, and Peter admitted he had been wrong (Galatians 2:11–14).

Now, this circumcision party had come to Antioch again, teaching that Gentiles had to be circumcised. Paul and Barnabas also learned this same false teaching was being spread in the churches they had just planted in Galatia. Paul wrote to them almost immediately after returning from the missionary journey that he was astonished they had “so quickly” deserted Christ for this “different gospel” (Galatians 1:6–7). This time they decided they needed to settle this issue once and for all. The church needed to nip this false teaching in the bud with an official declaration from all the leadership, both the original apostles, who had primarily focused on the Jews, and Paul and Barnabas, who were called to the Gentiles. The churches at Jerusalem and Antioch needed to be unified.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the apostles and elders, and they reported everything God had done through them in Cyprus, Galatia, and Pamphylia. But some of the circumcision party argued that the Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. So, the church leadership met to consider this question.

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<sup>1</sup>This could have occurred during Acts 11:19–30, but we aren’t sure exactly when, just that it was after Peter’s original declaration to the circumcision party in Acts 11 and before this council in Acts 15.



After much discussion, Peter made a statement reminding them of God's vision to him many years ago and how he shared the gospel with Cornelius's household, where God demonstrated His acceptance of them by pouring the Holy Spirit out on them just as He had done with the original disciples at Pentecost (Acts 10). Peter said God "purified their hearts by faith" (v. 9). In the Hebrew, the "heart" means the whole inner person, not just the emotions, as we typically think of it. Peter said this proved that God doesn't discriminate between Jew and Gentile; both are saved by grace through faith. Peter even reminded them that no Jew has ever been able to keep the law (neither we nor our ancestors), so why would we impose it on the Gentiles? Then Paul and Barnabas shared all the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. This all pointed to God's movement among the Gentiles; it wasn't something the apostles were imposing on the church. They were following God's lead.

Then James spoke up. This James was the brother of Jesus, not the brother of John who was one of the original Twelve who was martyred by Herod (Acts 12:2). This James was now the leader of the Jerusalem church, which was still considered its center, though Antioch had become the center of the mission to the Gentiles. James reminded them of the prophecy of the new covenant, that God would return and rebuild David's fallen tent, restoring it through Jesus—so "the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and *all the Gentiles* who are called by my name" (Amos 9:11–12). James declared his decision as leader—they would not make Gentiles keep the law but only tell them to abstain from food offered to idols, the meat of strangled animals, blood, and sexual immorality. These few requirements represent the handful of laws God gave Noah, which meant they applied to all peoples of the earth, before they became many different nations.<sup>2</sup>

This was a pivotal moment in the early church that showed the apostles' commitment to working through differences and coming together in unity. We saw it first in chapter 6 when the Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews had a conflict. They didn't split the church; they confronted the issue head on and worked through it. Here we are, around fifteen years later, and again, they confronted the conflict head on and worked through it. Paul and Barnabas could have just walked away and split off from the church in Jerusalem, but they were committed to unity as long as it didn't sacrifice the truth of the gospel. If the Jerusalem leaders had defended the false teaching, they would have split over it because it was an essential gospel issue. But they didn't, because they all sought God's will together.

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Keener, *Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (IVP, 1993).

**QUESTION** *Why was it important for all the apostles to meet to discuss this issue and come to a consensus? What would have been the result if they hadn't?*

**QUESTION** *What does their focus on sharing what God had been doing through the Gentiles tell us about how the apostles viewed the church?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / When the apostles met, they all sought together what the Lord was telling them about the issue, not just their own ideas, thoughts, and perspectives. When the circumcision party spoke, it was all their own ideas of what Scripture said. But when the apostles spoke, it was all about what God was doing and what God had said to them and shown them. And everything they heard or saw from the Holy Spirit was consistent. It was only human reason and human viewpoints that disagreed.

God has promised us that the Holy Spirit is not the author of confusion but of peace. He doesn't cause division but brings unity. When we talk things out, seek the Lord, and pray together for Him to reveal His truth to us, we will reach a consensus. But we must be humble enough to listen to God instead of focused on being right. Resolving conflict God's way always bring more unity. Not uniformity, where one person decides what is "right" and everyone conforms to their way of thinking, but true unity, where we all agree together on what is right because we see it from God's perspective.

This is the type of resolution we should always seek in the church. We can't just hope we won't ever have conflict. We will, because we're human. We can't just sweep it under the rug, ignore it, or hope it goes away. The model of the early church is to pray together, discuss one another's viewpoints and experiences, listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and then come to a consensus together as the Lord leads, not by human reason.

**QUESTION** *How have you seen conflict handled in churches? Which situations led to more unity and which led to division? Why?*

**QUESTION** *What conflicts do we currently have in the American church? How can we seek God's leading and unity on those issues?*

## 2. *The Council's Letter to the Gentiles*

### ✚ READ ACTS 15:22-35

**QUESTION** *What did this letter tell the Gentile believers about those from Jerusalem who had come teaching about circumcision?*

**QUESTION** *What did they call Paul and Barnabas? How did they describe them?*

The apostles and elders and the whole church at Jerusalem decided to send a letter to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, which was meant for all the Gentile believers everywhere. This was the church's official statement about this issue and could be used to confront false teachers who tried to infiltrate their churches with this "different gospel." The leaders at Jerusalem sent some of their own leaders, Silas and Judas Barsabbas, with Paul and Barnabas so the people at Antioch would know this letter really came from them and that they were unified in this statement, both Paul and Barnabas and the Jerusalem church leaders.

The letter said the false teachers of the circumcision party had come to Antioch without their authorization, which was significant because Paul had said these false teachers came "from James" (Galatians 2:12), making it sound like they were sent by the Jerusalem leadership to teach these things. But here the Jerusalem leaders made it clear this was a misunderstanding. The false teachers had come from the Jerusalem church, but they hadn't been sent by James or the leadership there.

This is why it was so important for Paul and Barnabas, instead of assuming the false teachers were being truthful, to take this matter directly to the Jerusalem leadership instead of splitting from the Jerusalem church without first discussing it with the church leaders. When they went directly to them, they learned the leaders there hadn't sent the circumcision party to spread that false teaching; the Jerusalem leaders actually agreed with them. This is why, when we have a conflict with someone, or we have heard something about someone, we are called to go directly to them and talk it out. We are not to gossip or listen to what other people say about them. Gossip only creates more division and breeds more lies. Direct healthy confrontation brings unity because it seeks to get to the truth.

The letter told the Gentile Christians what the council had decided. They were to follow the few laws God had given to all people through Noah, not the whole of the Jewish law. But they said it in a very interesting and intentional way—"It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." The apostles, elders, Paul and

Barnabas, and the leaders from Antioch all sought the leading of the Holy Spirit, not their own ideas or solutions.

The letter also confirmed the Jerusalem church's support of Paul and Barnabas and the mission to the Gentiles. Barnabas had come from the Jerusalem church; he was one of its earliest members and supporters (Acts 4:36). The Jerusalem leadership were the ones who originally sent Barnabas to Antioch to teach the new believers there and encourage the church (Acts 11:22). Paul also had the support of the Jerusalem leaders after Barnabas had convinced them that his conversion was real (Acts 9:27). Barnabas and Paul had brought the financial support from Antioch to Jerusalem during the famine (Acts 11:27–30). But a sense of division had arisen between the churches at Antioch and Jerusalem since Antioch had launched their mission to the Gentiles. Not because of the Jerusalem leaders but because of these false teachers who had come and stirred it up. The leaders in Jerusalem were addressing that division too with this letter, calling Barnabas and Paul their “dear friends” and recognizing that they had risked their lives for the gospel.

This letter unified the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch. It made an official churchwide statement against the false teaching of the circumcision party. The Jerusalem leadership confirmed their agreement with Paul and Barnabas theologically and supported the mission to the Gentiles. The people at Antioch read the letter and were encouraged. Judas and Silas spent time there, encouraging the believers and then were sent back to Jerusalem with the blessing of peace. This was a godly, peaceful ending to the conflict, showing again that God's intention for His church is to be unified as one body with Christ as the head. Unified in one mission, spreading the gospel and making disciples. Being of one mind and one heart, by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

**QUESTION** *What impact did this letter have on the church at Antioch? How did Judas and Silas impact the church too?*

**QUESTION** *If they had decided to separate into two churches, how might that have affected the church's mission?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / This letter was an official statement of the unity of the church at Jerusalem and the church at Antioch and the Jerusalem's support of Antioch and their united mission. This is the goal of the church—not just that each individual church be unified but that the church universal be unified. Each church should not be a separate entity doing its own thing, but together, we should be one “big C” church, supporting one another in one common mission.

The church today is divided, both theologically and in our missions. Some churches even act competitive with one another! And the church is largely failing at its mission to make disciples of the world, because “a house divided will not stand.” The church should be united from city to city and from church to church within each city, with one mission for the world, supporting and encouraging one another in that shared mission. That is the only way we will accomplish our mission and grow the church in this generation and beyond. This can only be done by all of us humbly submitting to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

**QUESTION** *How have you seen separation and division between churches in our world today? In our own community? What kind of impact has it had on the church’s mission?*

**QUESTION** *How have you seen churches and ministries working cooperatively toward a shared mission? How does this affect their impact on the world?*

### *3. Paul and Barnabas Separate*

#### **✚ READ ACTS 15:36-41**

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul and Barnabas separate for their next journey?*

**QUESTION** *How was this different from the way they handled the conflict with the Jerusalem church?*

This final section of this chapter is shocking and disappointing, especially coming right after this beautiful story of Paul and Barnabas working out the conflict with the Jerusalem leaders with such respect and grace by the leading of the Holy Spirit. Yet, God also redeemed even this failure on the part of His apostles and used it for good, to multiply the spread of the gospel.

After some time, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they go back and check on all the churches they had planted in the first missionary journey. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark, but Paul didn’t think it was wise since he had left the first journey early to return to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). We don’t know why John Mark left them. We know he grew up in Jerusalem in a wealthy household, because his mother’s home was large enough to hold a large gathering of the church (Acts 12:12). He could have not been

used to the discomfort and difficulties of that kind of travel. We also know he was very young because it was called his mother's home. In a patriarchal culture, this meant she was a widow, and he was not yet old enough to become the family patriarch. He could have simply been immature and not yet ready for this kind of mission. It's possible he was needed at home, though this was unlikely because his mother, Mary, was a significant leader in the Jerusalem church community. She supported his mission and would have been unlikely to pull him away except for an emergency. This doesn't seem to have been the case, because the text says he "deserted" them, not that he had to leave.

John Mark was Barnabas's cousin or nephew; the Greek word could mean either (Colossians 4:10), so it makes sense that Barnabas was more likely than Paul to give him a second chance. Paul said it wasn't wise to take him; he didn't think Barnabas was being discerning enough about John Mark because he was family. This is possible, because family ties were very strong in their culture, but Jesus taught His disciples that the body of Christ is your real family, not your biological one (Matthew 12:50). The text says they had such a "sharp disagreement" that they parted ways. This word is used only here and in one other passage in the New Testament, where Hebrews says believers should "provoke" one another to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24). This word is used to describe jabbing at one another in swordplay. This was an intense, emotional fight and quite surprising considering how close Paul and Barnabas had been up to this point, like spiritual family, and how they had just worked so hard to maintain unity with the Jerusalem leaders.

Barnabas is a nickname meaning "son of encouragement." Perhaps Paul thought he was being too encouraging to John Mark and not realistic enough about his weakness. Barnabas may have thought Paul wasn't being encouraging or willing enough to show grace to a young man who had made mistakes but was eager to try again. Paul was adamant about not giving in to false teachers who preached against the gospel, but this wasn't a false teacher situation. Regardless of who was right or wrong, this kind of sharp disagreement did not reflect the unity of the Holy Spirit. Had they humbly sought the Holy Spirit's will together, they would not have been so sharply divided. This is an example of a descriptive, not prescriptive text: Acts describes it as something that happened, but it doesn't condone it, which is especially obvious in this context, right after the story of the Jerusalem Council.

This time the conflict was personal, not theological, yet it was still a conflict that caused division in the church, something they should have sought the Holy Spirit about. There is no mention of them seeking the Holy Spirit through prayer or asking for His direction, even though they did that in many other places throughout Acts. This shows us that even God's most on-fire disciples can make mistakes, have fights, and stubbornly stick to their own side instead of doing what He has called us to do—live in humility, put the needs of others ahead of our own, work together in unity, and seek the Lord's will, not our own. We need to remember that although the apostles did amazing things by the power of the Spirit, they weren't perfect.

The good news is that God redeemed even this sharp disagreement and made it work for His glory and the advancement of the gospel. Because they split into two different teams, they went to twice as many

places and spread the gospel even further!

And eventually, they did reconcile. About twelve years later, John Mark was with Paul as a helper while Paul was on house arrest in Rome (Colossians 4:10). About three years after that, when Paul was awaiting the death penalty, he asked for John Mark to be brought to him because he considered him helpful in his ministry (2 Timothy 4:11). Either John Mark had greatly matured, or Paul had learned to be more patient with younger disciples, or both. Regardless, it is good to see they eventually reconciled, as did Paul and Barnabas. Only five years later, Paul talked about Barnabas positively as a fellow worker for the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:6–7).

**QUESTION** *Consider both Paul's and Barnabas's viewpoints. Why might both have had valid points?*

**QUESTION** *What do you think would have happened if they had sought the guidance of the Spirit and prayed together for unity?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / People can disagree about many different things within the church, from theological to personal conflict to the kind of music or color of the carpet. We shouldn't let those kinds of things divide us. Of course, we should not compromise on truth or condone sin if someone is refusing to repent. If we have confronted someone living in sin and they refuse to repent, we should break fellowship (Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5:9–13). If we confront a false teacher who will not listen to sound doctrine, we should get them out of the church before they lead others astray (2 John 1:10–11). For regular disagreements or conflicts with fellow believers who really are trying to follow Jesus, we cannot let those things divide us. We should always seek unity by the Holy Spirit in all things. If we remain humble, really seek the Lord, and pray together for unity, the Spirit will unify us. That is the Spirit's role. He is not the author of confusion but of peace. Not of division but unity. If we can't seem to come to a consensus, we need to keep praying until we do. He will unify us.

**QUESTION** *Reflect on personal disagreements you have had with fellow Christians. How did you handle them? How should you have handled them?*

**QUESTION** *How can we work to build unity in our church? How can we seek the Holy Spirit's guidance together?*

## [NEXT STEPS]

This section shows us how important unity is in the church and how we can always find unity when we seek the Spirit's guidance. This week, focus on seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance in your life and your family. Start every morning with prayer, asking for Him to lead you in every decision. Pray together for the Spirit's guidance as a family. Spend time in His Word, asking Him to reveal Himself to you through it. Ask Him to show you things that need to change in your life to follow Him more fully. See how intentionally focusing on asking the Spirit to guide you changes your daily decisions.

## [PRAY]

*+Pray for unity in our church as well as unity among the churches in our city and the church universal. [Feel free to add any specifics to the following prayer based on your personal knowledge or experience.]*

*Our gracious Father,*

*We thank you for calling us out of darkness and making us one body in Christ. You have redeemed us by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.*

*Forgive us for the pride, selfishness, and divisions that grieve your Spirit. Teach us to love one another deeply, to bear with one another in humility, and to pursue peace grounded in your truth.*

*Bind your people together—here in our local church, across our nation, and around the world—so that we may stand firm in the gospel, encourage one another, and reflect the love of Christ to a watching world.*

*Keep us faithful until the day we are united in glory, gathered before your throne, singing with one voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!"*

*We pray this in the name of Jesus, our Head and Shepherd. Amen.*



# *Paul's Second Missionary Journey, Part 1*

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

How have you experienced the Holy Spirit guidance? How did you know it was the Holy Spirit and not something else?

Read Acts 16.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand how to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit even when it doesn't make sense by human logic.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Disciples of Jesus follow the leading of the Holy Spirit even when it doesn't seem to make sense by human logic.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas followed the lead of the Holy Spirit closely, even when it didn't make sense. When they finished visiting the churches in Galatia, their next logical step would have been to go to Asia, but the Spirit said no. The next logical step would be Bithynia, but again the Spirit said no. Then they had a vision to go to Macedonia, and they went immediately. When they got to Philippi, they spoke first to a group of women, though that was not typical of Jewish men at all, because they were the ones at the place of prayer. When they were beaten and arrested, and their chains supernaturally fell off, they didn't escape. They stayed in place and brought the jailer to the Lord. When they could have gotten revenge on the magistrates who beat them, they didn't. They just had them publicly apologize to save the reputation of the church. Paul and Silas were prime examples of disciples who followed the lead of the Holy Spirit no matter what, including danger to themselves. This is an intense calling for us to follow today, but it is

the model the apostles set for us. To live is Christ, to die is gain.

## ✚ MEDITATE

"These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17).

## [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 you experienced the Holy Spirit leading you? How can we know when it is the Spirit guiding us?*

**QUESTION** *Share at least one example of a time you followed the Spirit even though it didn't seem to make sense. What was the result?*

In Acts 16, we see Paul and Barnabas following the Holy Spirit explicitly, even when it didn't make sense. When the Spirit said go, they went. When the Spirit said stop, they stopped. Even when it meant going past the closest places to one much farther away. Even when it meant speaking to a group of women, which was culturally taboo. Even through very dangerous situations that caused them great physical harm. They were completely in touch with the Holy Spirit and followed Him no matter what. In our lives today, we don't often experience physical danger by following the Spirit, but many times the Spirit may ask us to go somewhere or do something that seems a little crazy by human logic. As followers of Jesus, we are commanded to listen for the Holy Spirit's leading and follow Him no matter what, trusting that He has a plan for our lives, will use us for His kingdom, and that in any difficulty or suffering, we will be "afflicted in every way, but not crushed" (2 Corinthians 4:8) and "walk through the fire" but "not be burned" (Isaiah 43:2). He will use our suffering to make us more like Jesus (Romans 5:3–5).

## ✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In this section, Paul begins his second missionary journey, taking Silas with him instead of Barnabas because of their conflict over John Mark. In verses 1–15, they completely followed the guidance of the Spirit. When the Spirit said go, they went. When the Spirit said stop, they stopped. In Lystra, Timothy joined them, and Paul circumcised him, which may seem shocking considering the case he had just made about not requiring Gentiles to be circumcised. But Timothy was half Jewish, so it was a different situation. At Philippi, a wealthy businesswoman named Lydia was converted, and they stayed in her home. In verses 16–24, Paul and Silas were arrested because they had exorcised a demon from a young slave girl, and

her owners were upset that she could no longer practice divination for them. The crowd joined against them, and they were beaten and thrown in prison, even though being Roman citizens were protected from that kind of treatment. In verses 25–40, there was a great earthquake. All the prison doors were opened and everyone’s bonds unfastened, but the prisoners did not leave. When the jailer awoke and saw the situation, he was about to kill himself, but Paul stopped him, and the jailer asked him how to be saved. The next day, the magistrates tried to release them secretly, but Paul made them do it publicly and apologize, not for their own sake, but to save the reputation of the church in the area.

1. *Following the Spirit*
2. *Paul and Silas Imprisoned*
3. *The Jailer’s Conversion*

### [GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 16.

## 1. *Following the Spirit*

### ✚ READ ACTS 16:1–15

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul circumcise Timothy? How was this different from what he had argued against, the Pharisees’ teaching that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved?*

**QUESTION** *How do we see the Spirit guiding the apostles on this journey?*

At the end of the last chapter, Paul and Barnabas parted ways because of a disagreement about John Mark. Barnabas took John Mark and Paul chose Silas, one of the men who came from Jerusalem with them to deliver the letter from the Council. Barnabas and John Mark went the way they had originally gone, starting with Cyprus, where Barnabas grew up and still had family. Paul and Silas went the opposite way, to the churches they had started in Galatia, through Paul’s hometown of Tarsus in Cilicia, where his family was.

From Tarsus, Paul and Silas entered Galatia, to Derbe, then Lystra, both towns they had visited on their original journey. Lystra is where Paul had been stoned to the point of being thought dead, but the Lord healed him, so he was able to travel to Derbe (Acts 14:8–23). Now Paul was going back to the town

where he had been stoned! At Lystra, they met Timothy, who was thought highly of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, but there was a problem. Timothy's mother was a Jewish Christian, but his father was Greek, and Jews considered intermarriage a horrible sin.

Paul knew they would be witnessing to many Jews on their journey who would reject Timothy because of this. So, even though Paul had adamantly argued that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised to be saved and had even called the first church council about it, he circumcised Timothy for the sake of his witness among the non-Christian Jews they would encounter. Not because he believed Timothy needed it but because he knew the Jews wouldn't listen to Timothy otherwise. Paul believed that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters in the eyes of God (1 Corinthians 7:19); he did it because it removed a stumbling block for those he would be preaching to.

Paul said that though he was free and belonged to no one but Christ, he would become like a Jew to win the Jews and like a Gentile to win the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). Had Timothy been fully Gentile, Paul would not have circumcised him; he didn't circumcise Titus, who was fully Greek (Galatians 2:3). Paul hadn't changed his mind about the circumcision issue. As they went on their journey, they communicated the Jerusalem Council's decision to all the believers. To the Christian Jews, Paul would say circumcision or uncircumcision makes no difference for salvation. But he knew it was important to the Jews who had not yet become Christians that the men preaching to them were fully Jewish, not Gentile.

As they went throughout the rest of Galatia, the text tells us they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And they tried to go to Bithynia, but the Spirit didn't allow them. Then Paul had a vision of a man in Macedonia urging them to come help them, and immediately they went to Macedonia. Asia and Bithynia were both closer to Galatia, the next logical place to go; Macedonia was beyond both of them. The text doesn't tell us why the Spirit told them not to go to Asia and Bithynia. You would think He would want them to go everywhere! Maybe it would have been dangerous at the time. Maybe God would send others there instead. Regardless, this story makes it clear they were following the leading of the Holy Spirit. They didn't know why God shut the door to Asia and Bithynia, but they soon found out He was opening another door instead.

Starting in verse 10, Luke shifted from writing "they" to "we," meaning that starting in Troas, Luke was on this journey with them. Immediately, they left Troas and went to Philippi, which was the capital of this first district of Macedonia (Thessalonica was the overall capital) and a Roman colony. This little note in the text would have reminded the readers that Paul was a Roman citizen and therefore had 1) the right to travel freely throughout the Roman world, 2) the right to a fair trial, and 3) protection against torture and

whipping, which we'll look at in the next section.<sup>1</sup>

On the Sabbath they went to the riverside. If there was no synagogue, the Jews typically gathered there for prayer so they could use the river for their ritual handwashing. By Jewish law, a city had to have a minimum of ten Jewish men to have a synagogue; Philippi apparently didn't. But they found a group of women gathered by the river. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that tremendous numbers of Greek women were attracted to Judaism and became "God fearers," those who followed the teachings of Judaism but did not fully convert. It would have been scandalous for Jewish men in Israel to speak like this with a group of women, but in Macedonia women had more freedom. This being the first group they connected with in Macedonia shows that the kingdom of God not only shows no partiality between Jew and Gentile or between male or female (Galatians 3:28).

As Paul was preaching, the Lord opened the heart of Lydia, a God fearer and a dealer in purple cloth, a luxury good, which meant she was very wealthy. It was relatively unusual for a woman to be head of household and a wealthy businesswoman all on her own, but it was more likely in Macedonia. They baptized her and her whole household, and she invited them to stay with her while they were in Philippi. Lydia's salvation was purely a move of the Holy Spirit, reminding us that it is the Holy Spirit who draws people to Himself. We can plant and water seeds, but it is God who causes the growth. As a dealer in purple goods, Lydia interacted with traders from all over and customers from the wealthy elite. This meant their message could spread even farther and wider, particularly among the wealthy and powerful.

**QUESTION** *What does it tell us about the apostles that they stopped when the Spirit said stop, even though it would have made sense to go to Bithynia next?*

**QUESTION** *Why might a wealthy woman being converted help their message spread?*

**APPLICATION POINT #1/** Timothy's choice to be circumcised shows us that when we are witnessing to people, we need to meet them where they are, speak their language, and connect with them on their terms, not our own. Timothy couldn't expect non-Christian Jews to understand his view on circumcision. He had to connect with them where they were. Once they became Christians, he could share that truth with them. An example of this today might be witnessing to a couple who live together outside of marriage. You don't start by telling them they're living in sin. You just love them where they are, share the gospel with them, and let the Holy Spirit convict them of that later, after they accept Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Curley, Civitas – Why Roman Citizenship Was So Important, History Hogs, February 8, 2024 - <https://historyhogs.com/civitas-why-roman-citizenship-was-so-important/>

**APPLICATION POINT #2/** In this section, Paul, Silas, and Timothy followed the leading of the Holy Spirit completely. They didn't know why the Spirit told them not to go into Asia and Bithynia, but they stopped when He said stop. They trusted His direction even when it didn't make sense to them. In our lives, we may not know why God shuts a door, but soon we will see He is opening another. Sometimes He stops us from doing what we think makes sense or what seems right because He wants to send us somewhere else or do something else in our lives. We have to trust that God knows what is best, listen for His voice, and obey.

**APPLICATION POINT #3/** This story tells us that when Paul was speaking, the Lord stirred Lydia's heart to believe. The Holy Spirit is the one who draws people to Himself. When we witness to people, we are only responsible for sharing the truth, not for whether they accept it. We just plant the seeds and water the seeds; it is God who causes the growth.

**QUESTION** *Describe a time God closed a door and at first you didn't understand why. What was the result? What other doors did He open instead?*

**QUESTION** *Reflect on those you know who are far from God. How can you meet them where they are with the gospel?*

## 2. Paul and Silas Imprisoned

### ✚ READ ACTS 16:16-24

**QUESTION** *How did the slave girl know who Paul and Silas were?*

**QUESTION** *Why did the slave girl's owners get mad at Paul and Silas?*

In this story, Paul and Silas were still in Philippi, staying with Lydia and teaching the group of women God fearers at the riverside. Another Sabbath, on their way to the river, they were met by a very young slave girl with a "spirit of divination" whose owners made a lot of money using her for fortunetelling. The Greek literally says "the spirit of Python"; this was a specific demon who was giving her demonic powers of divination. Python is a character in Greek mythology; Scripture tells us that the "gods" of pagan religions are really demons (Deuteronomy 32:17). Python was not a god but a serpent monster, the son of Gaia

("Earth"), who guarded the oracle at Delphi, which Greeks considered to be the center of the earth. He was represented by a stone Python guarding there. In Greek mythology, the god Apollo slew Python and took over his oracle at Delphi, establishing a temple there where people came for guidance and divination.

The slave girl followed them, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." Demons always recognized Jesus and His apostles in Scripture. The man in Mark 5 who was possessed by "Legion" also called Jesus "Son of the Most High God." Demons know the truth about who the real God is and how to be saved, even if they don't worship Him (James 2:19). While her words were true, Paul was "annoyed" because he didn't want their message to be associated with witchcraft and false religions. The Greek word translated "annoyed" here isn't just mild irritation; it's deep distress, worry, or grief. After several days of this, he commanded the spirit to leave her, and it did so immediately.

Her owners were upset because, with the demon gone, she lost her ability to tell the future. They could no longer make money by her. They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the magistrates. Magistrates were Roman officials under the consul who acted as judicial officers; there were two in Philippi. In the Roman world the marketplace was the center of all civic activity, as opposed to the Jewish world, where the temple was the center and the Sanhedrin was the judicial body. They accused Paul and Silas of teaching Jewish customs that were unlawful for Romans to practice, but it was really just about money.

The crowd joined in the attack, and the magistrates ordered Paul and Silas to be stripped and beaten with rods. This was regular practice for anyone accused of a crime if they were not a Roman citizen, which Paul and Silas were. Even before a trial was held to determine whether a person was guilty, the accused would be beaten as a way to secure evidence against them, humiliate them publicly, and discourage their followers. The Roman world was brutal for lower-class, non-citizens. There were no Miranda rights, no "innocent until proven guilty," no right to a fair trial for all. Those protections existed only for Roman citizens. Paul and Silas were Roman citizens but also Jews. Their accusers introduced them to the magistrates as Jews. They didn't check their citizenship. After they were beaten, they were thrown into prison.

**QUESTION** *What does this story teach us about the power of the Holy Spirit over the demonic?*

**QUESTION** *Imagine you were falsely accused of a crime and then beaten even though you were a citizen and were supposed to be protected against that kind of treatment. How would you be feeling if you were Paul and Silas?*

**APPLICATION POINT #1** / Magic can be just fantasy, pretend stories like Disney movies and Harry Potter books. But there is a real witchcraft practiced by people in the real world, and it is always powered by the demonic. There is a real supernatural world of angels and demons. These demons have some supernatural power to do things, but their power is much less than God's. For example, demons cannot truly know the future as God does, since only He perfectly knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:9–10). As created beings, demons have finite knowledge but possess vast experience, perfect recall of history, keen observation of present events, and deep understanding of human behavior, enabling them to make highly accurate predictions that can appear supernatural. Scripture shows they may recognize spiritual realities (Mark 1:23–24) or manipulate circumstances (Acts 16:16–18), but any apparent foretelling is really an educated guess, intentional influence to bring events about, or something God permits—never genuine divine foreknowledge. Remember the story of the plagues in Exodus. Pharaoh's magicians could copy the first few plagues with their own demonic power, but they couldn't replicate the plague of gnats, and they exclaimed, "This is the finger of God!" Throughout the Gospels, Jesus demonstrated His power over the demonic, and the disciples did so here by the power of the Holy Spirit as well. Paul had only to tell that demon to leave her and it did. This teaches us that though the demonic world is real and has some power, we don't need to be afraid of it, because "he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). The demonic is no match for Jesus. We may not have experienced overt demon possession like this, but we all experience spiritual warfare whether we realize it or not. There is a battle raging in the spiritual realm all around us every day (Ephesians 6:10–18).

**APPLICATION POINT #2** / Paul and Silas were not only falsely accused, they were also treated as if they were non-citizens. Their Roman citizenship didn't protect them from abuse even though it should have. All because of lost a business venture, not even because of religious reasons. People may persecute us for all kinds of reasons, and it will often be extremely unfair. Regardless, we are called to continue to preach the gospel no matter what.



**QUESTION** *How have you experienced spiritual warfare? How have you seen God be stronger than the demonic powers in the world around you?*

**QUESTION** *How have you been treated unfairly because of your faith? How did you respond?*

### 3. The Jailer's Conversion

#### ✚ READ ACTS 16:24-40

**QUESTION** *Why did the jailer try to kill himself? Why did Paul tell him to stop?*

**QUESTION** *How did Paul respond when the magistrates wanted to let them go quietly?*

The text makes sure to tell us that when Paul and Silas were in prison, they were in the “inner prison,” and their feet were fastened in stocks. The jailer was making sure they couldn’t get out. Stocks were not only used to keep prisoners contained but were also used for torture because the prisoner could be forced into painful positions. Though they had been beaten and were in chains, Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns well into the night. Their behavior was consistent with their theology, rejoicing in their sufferings. They didn’t just say it, they lived it. At midnight, there was a violent earthquake. All the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. The text makes it clear that it wasn’t just Paul and Silas in the prison; other prisoners were listening to them pray and sing, and all their doors were open and chains unfastened. You could say this was just a random natural occurrence if it had just been the doors coming open, but the stocks coming loose couldn’t have happened from an earthquake.

When the jailer awoke, he drew his sword to kill himself because he knew he would be executed for letting the prisoners escape. But Paul cried out to stop him, saying they were all there—not just him and Silas but all the prisoners, even those who weren’t believers. The text doesn’t tell us this, but the Spirit must have somehow told them to stay. When a similar thing happened to Peter in Jerusalem, the Spirit told him to leave (Acts 12). It would have been logical for them to leave; they would have only stayed if the Spirit told them to. It would have been pretty unbelievable for Paul and Silas to have convinced the other prisoners to stay too. If you were in prison and the doors magically flew open and your chains fell off, what would you do? The other prisoners must have also heard a supernatural command to stay.

The jailer fell at Paul and Silas's feet and asked them how to be saved. This may seem an unusual thing to ask, but he would have heard them singing and praying in the jail, perhaps even preaching the gospel to the other prisoners. They told him to believe in the Lord Jesus and "spoke the word of the Lord" to him and his whole household. He brought them "up" into his house; many prison cells were in underground catacomb-type rooms of the jailer's house, and his family lived above it. The jailer washed their wounds, and they baptized him and his whole family. Then he set food before them, showing them proper hospitality. This was now another influential person who had become a believer and could spread the gospel far and wide in Macedonia.

But the story doesn't end there. The next day the magistrates sent a message to the jailer to let Paul and Silas go. We don't know why. They could have seen the earthquake as a sign from the gods, Lydia could have argued on their behalf, or maybe they thought the public beating was enough to silence them. Paul had a bold response. He could have taken this as a gift and left in peace, as the jailer said, but instead he demanded that the magistrates come themselves to let them go. Because they had beaten them publicly, they should release them publicly.

The magistrates hadn't known they were Roman citizens when they beat them; it's unclear whether Paul tried to tell them or not. Perhaps he tried and they didn't listen, or he purposely didn't tell them and endured the beating so they would have leverage over the magistrates to ensure the future safety of the rest of their church community. Because they had been beaten illegally, the magistrates would be in an awkward legal position. They could be disqualified from office and even deprive Philippi of its status as a Roman colony. The magistrates were now afraid of Paul and Silas. They apologized to them publicly and asked them to leave. This was a posture of humility, because they couldn't make them leave.

Paul and Silas could have demanded a trial and publicly humiliated the magistrates further or even brought legal action against them, but for the sake of the peace of the church in that area, they simply visited the church at Lydia's house to encourage them and left. At first it may seem like they wanted justice for themselves, but if that had been what they were after, they would have reported the magistrates for what they had done. Instead, they demanded a public apology so the church's reputation in the community wouldn't be stained. But they didn't demand that the magistrates be punished for beating them, as they could have. Like Jesus, their attitude was to forgive them, for they knew not what they did.

**QUESTION** *How did Paul and Silas's unjust beating and false accusations mirror what happened to Jesus?*

**QUESTION** *How did Paul and Silas listen to the leading of the Spirit against human logic in this story?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Paul and Silas again listened to the leading of the Holy Spirit in this story, in a way that was contrary to human logic. They allowed themselves to be beaten even though that was illegal for Roman citizens. When the chains supernaturally fell off them, they didn't escape but stayed to protect the jailer from being punished for letting them escape. Then when the magistrates realized what they had done, Paul and Silas demanded a public apology for the sake of the church's reputation, but they didn't demand punishment for the magistrates, which they could have. This was all because their hearts were focused on spreading the gospel, not on anything for themselves, including their own safety! They weren't worried about their reputation for their own sakes but for the sake of Christ and the gospel message. As believers, our mission is to advance the gospel, regardless of the personal consequences. We are to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit even when it doesn't make sense to us. Because we are living for Christ, no longer for ourselves.

**QUESTION** *Describe times you have followed the leading of the Holy Spirit contrary to human logic. What was the result?*

**QUESTION** *How can we attune ourselves more closely to the Holy Spirit so we can know where He is leading us?*

## [NEXT STEPS]

This section shows us that disciples follow the leading of the Holy Spirit regardless of the cost to themselves. This week, seek the voice of the Holy Spirit. Ask Him to show you where He is calling you to go and what He is calling you to do, even if it doesn't make sense to you. Then submit to that leading.

## [PRAY]

*+As you pray for the Holy Spirit to guide you, use the words of Psalm 23 as a prayer to remind yourself that the Lord is our shepherd. And even though He may lead us through the valley of the shadow of death, following Him is the best and safest way we can go.*

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

*2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

*He leads me beside still waters.*

*3 He restores my soul.*

*He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.*

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
forever.

—Amen

# *Paul's Second Missionary Journey, Part 2*

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

How have you experienced opposition to your attempts to share your faith with others? How did you respond?

Read Acts 17:1–18:22.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help encourage you to continue in ministry despite frustrations, struggles, and even persecution. Ask Him to reveal to you how you can meet people where they are with the message of the gospel.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Disciples of Jesus don't give up sharing the gospel when there is opposition. They seek to meet people where they are and speak their language to connect the gospel to their lives.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

In Athens, Paul did an incredible job of connecting the gospel to Athenian culture, beliefs, and experience. It's a great model for us for how to share the gospel with people who are far from God, who don't know anything about Him. He started by going where the people were, even when it was outside his comfort zone. Then he spoke their language, using examples from their culture, history, prophets, and poets as points of connection to the gospel. Today, this would be like using modern movies, song lyrics, current events, or someone's own life experience to talk to people about how those things reveal the sinful condition of humanity, the love of God, and our need for His salvation. The goal is to meet people where they are, speak to their need for Jesus, and make connections to the gospel. To make the gospel relevant to their lives. To speak their language, not "Christianeze."

## + MEDITATE

"In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

### [GETTING STARTED]

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

**QUESTION** *What opposition to your attempts to share the gospel have you experienced? What makes it hard to share the gospel in our culture?*

**QUESTION** *Reflect on the people you currently know who are far from God. What are some ways you can meet them where they are (their perspective, viewpoint, beliefs, struggles, doubts, experience, etc.) and make connections between the gospel and their everyday lives?*

In Acts 17:1–18:22, we see that Paul and Silas had great success with the gospel. But they also encountered great opposition among the Jews who saw the gospel as a threat to their tradition and religion instead of seeing Jesus as the fulfillment of it. We also see that Paul did an incredible job of witnessing to the Greeks in Athens, who had no background knowledge about God at all, meeting them where they were and finding points of connection with their language, history, and culture to show them the gospel. Overall, the message is to keep preaching the gospel in whatever way you can, in any way people will hear and understand. Even through opposition, even through suffering and persecution, keep preaching the gospel. This is our mission as the church.

## + UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In this section, Paul continued his second missionary journey, experiencing both great success in spreading the gospel and great opposition from the Jews. In 17:1–15, at Thessalonica, many believed, but the Jews formed a mob against them and dragged their host, Jason, before the city authorities. Paul and Silas went by night to Berea, where many Jews examined the Scriptures for themselves and believed the gospel. But the Jews from Thessalonica came and stirred up the crowds against them. Paul escaped but left Silas and Timothy at Berea. In 17:16–34, when Paul was in Athens, he was disturbed by the many idols there and reasoned both with the Jews in the synagogue and the Greeks in the marketplace.

The Greek philosophers asked Paul to present his views at the Areopagus, as they typically did with interesting new teachings. Paul used an altar “to the unknown god” he had seen and some of the words of their own poets to tell them that this God was the only God, and we are all His offspring. In Acts 18:1–21, Paul went to Corinth, where he worked as a tentmaker with a couple named Priscilla and Aquila. When the Jews reviled him, Paul shook out his garments and said he would only preach to the Gentiles from then on. But then the ruler of the synagogue became a believer, and God appeared to Paul in a vision, telling him to not stop preaching. He stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, until the Jews brought him before the new proconsul, Gallio, who refused to judge religious matters between Jews. Paul went to Ephesus, leaving Priscilla and Aquila to establish the church there, and returned to Antioch.

1. *Thessalonica and Berea: Success and Opposition*
2. *Athens: Meeting People Where They Are*
3. *Corinth and Ephesus: Success and Opposition*

## [GOING DEEPER]

+This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 17:1–18:22.

### 1. *Thessalonica and Berea: Success and Opposition*

#### ✚ READ ACTS 17:1–15

**QUESTION** *What did the Jews say about the apostles when they dragged Jason before the city authorities?*

**QUESTION** *How did the Bereans double check that what Paul was preaching was true?*

At the end of the last chapter, Paul and Silas had been imprisoned in Philippi, so they were getting used to opposition on their journey. When they arrived at Thessalonica, they went to the synagogue, and for three Sabbaths Paul reasoned with the Jews from the Scriptures, explaining how Jesus fulfilled prophecies about the Messiah suffering and rising from the dead. Paul was an expert at the Old Testament Scriptures. Not only was he a Pharisee, but he has also studied under the very famous rabbi, Gamaliel, who was president of the Sanhedrin and was considered one of the greatest teachers in Jewish history. Some of the Jews were persuaded along with “a great many” of the “devout Greeks” (God-fearers) and many of the leading women. In Macedonia, women had more power, independence, and influence than in Israel.

But the Jewish leaders were jealous, so they paid some of the idle, unemployed troublemakers who hung out in the marketplace to stir up a crowd against Paul and Silas. They raided their host, Jason's, house looking for them but couldn't find Paul and Silas, so they dragged Jason and some of the other believers before the city officials instead. This term for city officials, "politarchs," was unique to Macedonia. Rome gave them a free hand to run the city, but they had to answer to Rome for any inappropriate actions. The Jews accused Paul and Silas of defying Caesar's decrees by teaching that Jesus was king instead. Politarchs were required to enforce loyalty to Caesar.

Note what the Jews called Paul and Silas—"these men who have turned the world upside down." They meant it as a bad thing, but in light of the gospel, this is a great description! This is exactly what God's people are supposed to do, because the ways of Jesus are upside-down from the world. The way they said it—these men have come here too—means they had heard about Paul and Silas before they came and likely all the towns in their area were hearing about them. The apostles were having a major impact in the world!

When the politarchs heard this accusation, they were greatly disturbed and required Jason to pay a bond, a financial guarantee that they would not cause any further disturbances. As soon as night fell, they sneaked Paul and Silas out to Berea, a change in direction (south) from the way they had been going along the *Via Engatia* (west). Paul was not deterred from sharing the gospel, but they did go a different direction.

At Berea, they also went to the synagogue and explained how Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament to the Jews there. But Acts says the Jews in Berea were nobler than those in Thessalonica because they examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul was teaching was true. In Thessalonica, the people had just listened to Paul's teaching on the Sabbath. At Berea, they searched the Scriptures 1) for themselves and 2) daily. They received the gospel "with eagerness," but they didn't have just an emotional reaction. They studied, prayed, and discerned whether what they were hearing was true. Instead of "some," like in Thessalonica, "many" of the Jews in Berea believed, along with many Greek God-fearers, both men and women. This shows us that when you really study the Scriptures, it is clear that Jesus is the Messiah!

Unfortunately, the same Jews who opposed them in Thessalonica heard they were having success in Berea and came and stirred up crowds against them there too. So, they immediately sent Paul away, but Silas and Timothy stayed there to teach the new Berean believers.



**QUESTION** *Why were these Jews in Thessalonica so threatened by the apostles?*

**QUESTION** *How did the apostles turn the world upside down? What kind of impact were they having?*

**APPLICATION POINT #1** / The disciples were becoming known as “men who turned the world upside down.” When we are doing the Lord’s work and fulfilling His mission to spread the gospel all over the world, it will turn the world upside down. Because Jesus’s ways, the ways of His kingdom, are upside down from the ways of the world—humility instead of power, generosity instead of accumulating wealth, looking out for the vulnerable instead of looking out for #1, etc. If we blend in with the world around us, living the same way the world does, we aren’t shining the light of Christ to the world. We should hope people would describe us this way!

**APPLICATION POINT #2** / When the Bereans heard the gospel, even though they were excited about it, they checked the Scriptures diligently to make sure it was true. Anytime we hear anything from a church leader, speaker, or teacher, we should always examine the Scriptures for ourselves. Even someone who seems like a great teacher can be a wolf in sheep’s clothing, and even the most trusted pastor can accidentally get things wrong sometimes. We should always examine the Scriptures for ourselves!

**QUESTION** *In what ways is your life upside down from those around you? How could those looking at the way you live tell you are a follower of Jesus?*

**QUESTION** *How can you grow in your understanding of God’s Word for yourself, rather than just relying on what other people tell you about it?*

## 2. Athens: Meeting People Where They Are

### ✚ READ ACTS 17:16-34

**QUESTION** *Why was Paul's spirit provoked within him?*

**QUESTION** *How did Paul use their idol worship to preach the gospel to them?*

When Paul arrived in Athens, his spirit was “provoked” at seeing how many idols were in the city. He would have felt this way about idols as a Jew as well. This unique word is only used twice in the New Testament, here and in the description of love as not being “easily provoked” (1 Corinthians 13:5 NASB), though a related word is used about the “sharp” disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39) and how the church should be “provoking” one another to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24 KJV). It literally means to “sharpen beside” and is used in swordplay to describe jabbing at each other. Paul was cut to the quick.

In Greece, the city streets were lined with statues of men and gods, but Athens was especially decorated with hundreds of *Hermae*, tall square pillars mounted with the head of the god Hermes. Hermes was one of the twelve Olympian gods, the son of Zeus and the nymph Maia, and the messenger of the gods in Greek mythology. He was the god of several different things, but as the god of travelers, he was worshipped not only on special occasions but every time an Athenian stepped outside to travel anywhere, even across town.

In Athens, Paul reasoned with the Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and every other day of the week he talked with whoever happened to be in the marketplace. Athens was known for being a center of Greek philosophy, and the marketplace was lively with debating philosophers. He began talking with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers:

- *Epicureans* taught that the highest good is pleasure, defined as the absence of pain. They rejected the notion of an immortal soul and believed death was the end of human existence. They advocated simple living, friendship, and freedom from fear, especially fear of death and gods. They believed if there were gods, they weren't involved in our lives and were therefore irrelevant. The Epicureans were only influential among the upper class.

- *Stoicism* argued that virtue is the only true good; external things (wealth, health, etc.) are neutral. They emphasized self-control, rational acceptance of fate, and living in harmony with nature. Stoics were more popular because they opposed worldly pleasure as the purpose of human existence. They criticized the Epicureans.

They called Paul a “babbler,” which literally means seed-picker, like a crow, but came to be used figuratively to call someone an idiot. They said he was preaching “foreign gods”—Jesus and “the resurrection,” which was also a woman’s name in Greek. They brought Paul to the Areopagus, a council that evaluated new teaching. Luke tells us that Athenians were known for doing nothing but telling or hearing something new.

When Paul spoke before the Areopagus, he started out by 1) complimenting them, which was typical for their culture and 2) meeting them where they were. He found something he had observed in their culture and used it to preach the gospel. Among their many idols, they had one altar to “the unknown god.” Long before Paul’s time (6th century BC), there was a plague in Athens and the people made sacrifices to all their gods, but nothing worked. After consulting the Oracle of Delphi, they asked for help from the prophet and poet Epimenides from Crete, one of the “seven wise poets” of ancient Greece. He brought some sheep to the Areopagus and released them. Wherever a sheep lay down, he marked the spot, and in those spots they made sacrifices to “an unknown god” and the plague immediately stopped.

Paul told them this unknown god is the God, the only God, Lord of heaven and earth. He is not like their gods; He doesn’t live in a temple made by man, nor is He served by human hands. He doesn’t need us; He is the one who gives life to us. He is the God of every nation; we are all His children. Paul also connected to their culture and their belief system by quoting the same poet who rescued them from the plague, Epimenides, saying, “In him we live and move and have our being ... we are His offspring.” This God is not made of gold, silver, or stone. He made human beings; we didn’t make Him. Paul spoke their language and used their culture, customs, and beliefs to meet them with the gospel where they were. Some who were listening mocked Paul when they heard about the resurrection of the dead. Others wanted to hear more. And others joined him and believed.

**QUESTION** *How did Paul meet the Athenians where they were to share the gospel? How did he “speak their language”?*

**QUESTION** *What does this tell us about how we should share the gospel with those who are far from God?*

**APPLICATION POINT #1** / Paul didn't just stick to the Jewish synagogues; he went into the Greek marketplace. We can be a witness wherever we go, but we have to be willing to go where the people who need Jesus are. We can't sit at church and wait for them to come to us. Most unbelievers won't ever come into a church unless they have first had some kind of encounter out in the world with someone who shared their faith and invited them. We need to go out into the world, wherever people are, to share the gospel, even if it is somewhere outside of our comfort zone. We don't have to go in a preachy kind of way but just live out our faith and talk to people naturally about Jesus.

**APPLICATION POINT #2** / Paul found a way to connect the gospel to the Athenian culture, belief system, and experience. When we speak to people about Jesus, we need to find out who they are, what they believe, and where they are coming from to learn how to speak their language and make connections to the gospel in a way that makes sense to them. We have to figure out how to show them Jesus is the answer they are looking for. If we believe our God is the one true God and the gospel is the only way to Him, then we must believe Jesus is the answer to whatever anyone is looking for, what they are missing, what they need. We just have to listen to them long enough to hear what it is and then help them make that connection to Jesus.

### *3. Corinth and Ephesus: Success and Opposition*

#### **✦ READ ACTS 18:1-22**

**QUESTION** *What was Paul's relationship with Priscilla and Aquila?*

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul shake his garments out against the Corinthian Jews?*

When Paul left Athens, he went to Corinth, where he lived and worked with fellow Jewish Christians named Priscilla and Aquila, because they were also tentmakers by trade. During much of his ministry, Paul worked at tentmaking and preached the gospel in addition to his day job. He did this intentionally; he wanted to support himself because he didn't want to be a burden to his supporters (2 Corinthians 11:9; 1 Thessalonians 2:9). At times in his ministry, like when he was in prison, he did rely on church's financial support (Philippians 4:18). In the ancient world, the government did not provide prisoners with food and clothing. They had to rely on family and friends to provide for them.

Working as a tentmaker not only provided Paul an income but would have also given him opportunities to connect with people in the marketplace and then share the gospel. To this day, we often refer to pastors

who work a secular job to support themselves and do ministry on the side as “tentmakers.” This doesn’t mean Paul expected everyone to do ministry this way. When writing to Timothy, he told the people that those who labor in ministry deserve fair wages for the work they do (1 Timothy 5:18).

Priscilla and Aquila were Jews who had recently come from Italy because the emperor Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. Corinth was a very wealthy cosmopolitan city that was well-known for its sexual immorality, including temple prostitution at the temple of Aphrodite. Paul witnessed to these Aphrodite-worshipping Greeks in the marketplace, and every Sabbath he reasoned with Jews in the synagogue.

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was able to focus completely on his ministry because they brought a gift of financial support from the church there. But the Jews opposed him, and Paul shook out his garments, which meant the same thing as “shaking the dust from your feet” (Mark 6:7–13). He told them he was giving up on them and only going to the Gentiles from then on. But when he left them, he went to the house of a Greek God-fearer named Titius Justus, who lived next door to the synagogue. The ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, and his entire household believed and many more Corinthians with them. Right after he said he was giving up on the Jews, the ruler of the synagogue became a believer. Was that a sign from the Lord?

Just in case he didn’t get the message, God also appeared to him in a vision and told him not to stop preaching. God promised him that no one in Corinth would attack him. Both the conversion of Crispus and the vision from the Lord tell us that Paul’s reaction of shaking his garments wasn’t from the Holy Spirit; it was just his emotional reaction, which was totally understandable. They were “reviling” him, slandering him. Most of us would have reacted the same way. Though the apostles mostly listened to and followed the Holy Spirit throughout Acts, and they did some amazing things, they weren’t perfect. They were human. There were times they acted emotionally or immaturely, like when Paul split with Barnabas. Later, Paul changed his mind and didn’t really only preach to the Gentiles after this, because in the very next place, Ephesus, he went directly to the synagogue to teach.

Paul stayed in Corinth teaching the Word for a year and a half and no one attacked him until Gallio became proconsul of Achaia (51 AD), when the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the “tribunal.” The Greek literally says they led him to the *bema*, the “high place” or judgment seat, a platform where judges would sit to hear cases brought before them. While the English term “tribunal” implies a group of people, this was just one judge, Gallio. The *bema* was at the eastern end of the Corinthian forum, in full view of the public.

Before Paul could even respond to the Jews’ accusations, Gallio dismissed their case because it seemed to him like a religious dispute between the Jews, not a matter for him to judge. Gallio sent them away. The crowd beat Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, who had led the attack against Paul, right in front

of the bema where Gallio sat, but he ignored them. The Greek literally says, “Nothing about these things mattered to him.” On the one hand, this judgment was good for the church; the government would not interfere with their work, at least for the time being. On the other hand, it showed that the Jews were on the offense against them.

Paul didn’t leave Corinth immediately; he stayed “many days” longer. But then he left for Syria, taking Priscilla and Aquila along as coworkers both in tentmaking and in the gospel. When they came to Ephesus, Paul reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue, but when they asked him to stay longer, he declined, saying he would return to them if God willed. He left Priscilla and Aquila there to establish the Ephesian church and returned to Antioch.

**QUESTION** *What does it tell us about Paul that he had such an emotional reaction to the Jews reviling him? What does it tell us about God that He told him to keep preaching to them?*

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul choose to support himself with tentmaking rather than financial support from churches? What are the pros and cons of this choice?*

**APPLICATION POINT #1** / Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila worked as tentmakers to support themselves financially so they wouldn’t burden the churches. But they also taught that it was okay for pastors to be paid and that they should be paid a fair wage. Today, we see both styles of ministry —fulltime pastors, those who do it as volunteers in addition to their day jobs, and those who are bi-vocational. Throughout church history and in many countries, bi-vocational pastors have been more the norm than those who are fully funded by their churches. There are pros and cons to each choice. Any of those options is fine as long as the church isn’t being burdened financially and the pastor is being provided for, not taken advantage of.

**APPLICATION POINT #2** / This also shows us that any believer can be a minister, even if we have “day jobs.” Scripture says if you have been reconciled to God, you are a minister of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17–18). All disciples are called to make disciples and be witnesses for Christ (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:8), not just the “professional” fulltime pastors. We are all called to preach the gospel as we go about our day-to-day lives.

**APPLICATION POINT #3** / God told Paul not to give up, not to stop preaching, even if he felt frustrated, even if he felt they weren’t listening, even if he felt scared for his safety. We can’t give up, even if it feels like we’ve been telling people about Jesus for years and they’ve only reviled us in return. You never know what impact you are making, what seeds you are planting. We must continue to preach God’s Word even if we are rejected or persecuted. We may suffer for the gospel, but He is watching over us. Even if we die

for the gospel, which many of these apostles eventually did. For believers, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

**QUESTION** *How might God be calling you into other positions in ministry, either in addition to your “day job” or even as a career?*

**QUESTION** *Reflect on those you’ve shared the gospel with for many years, yet it seems fruitless. How can you stay encouraged to stay the course? How can you pray for them and for others to come into their lives to impact them too?*

## **[NEXT STEPS]**

This section shows us that disciples continue to preach the gospel even through great opposition, and they think creatively about how to connect the gospel to their listeners’ culture, history, beliefs, and experience. This week, choose one person with whom God is leading you to share the gospel and ask Him to give you the right words to say to connect the gospel to their life in a relevant way so you can meet them where they are with the gospel.

## **[PRAY]**

+Pray for the Lord to give you the courage and perseverance to preach the gospel regardless of opposition and the wisdom and creativity to meet people where they are with the gospel.

Dear Lord,

*Fill me with a passion for sharing the gospel. Help me see the urgency of sharing the truth with friends, family, and everyone I encounter. Give me the courage and perseverance to share the gospel with others even if they reject, revile, or even persecute me. Give me the creativity to know how to make connections between the gospel and people’s everyday lives. Show me how I can meet people where they are, speak their language, and show them that Jesus is the answer to every need. Most of all, make my life a reflection of your love so people are drawn to your Spirit in me. In Jesus Name, Amen.*

Now make a list of all the people who are far from Jesus who are already in your life. Pray over each one, asking God to show you how to connect with them, meet them where they are, and share the gospel with them.

# *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 discipled (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.*

# Paul's Arrest

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

Describe any time you have been falsely accused of something. What happened? How did you respond? How were you able to prove your innocence?

Read Acts 21:15–23:35.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to give you the strength and courage to trust in Jesus and follow Him on mission for the gospel, wherever it takes you.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Disciples of Jesus follow Him on mission for the gospel wherever it takes them, trusting He will give them the strength to persevere and equip them with all that they need.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

In his arrest in Jerusalem and speeches before the Jews and the Sanhedrin, we see how Paul endured personal suffering to preach the gospel where God had called him to go. Throughout church history and even today, we have seen many missionaries who went into dangerous situations, trusting God to protect them through it but also accepting that if they die, they die. And that would actually be wonderful because then they would be in heaven with Jesus. The question is, does the average modern American Christian in the church pews today have this attitude? We applaud those who are willing to be martyrs, but many of us aren't even willing to be made fun of for the gospel. We aren't willing to step out of our comfort zone to help someone in need. Or we don't feel any real urgency to share our faith, much less feel like it's our only purpose in being alive. This lesson, like so much of Acts, is a wakeup call for the modern American church. Do our lives look anything like the early disciples of Jesus? Do our churches look like theirs? Do we understand what discipleship really is?

## ✚ MEDITATE

"[Jesus] said, 'Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome' (Acts 23:11).

## 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 you seen people show courage and strength in sharing the gospel in dangerous situations?*

**QUESTION** *How have you felt God calling you to step outside your comfort zone to share the gospel?*

In Paul's arrest and speeches before the Jews and the Sanhedrin, we see his incredible courage and commitment to the mission. He had one single purpose in life, to share the gospel. That was it. Nothing else. No matter what the personal cost to himself. Paul's example should inspire us to also step outside of our comfort zones to share the gospel in every situation. To ask God to use us and send us into the world, even into scary situations. To ask Him to give us the boldness to share the gospel and also the wisdom to do know how to do it in the most effective way. To ask Him to show us just where He wants us to go and who He wants us to reach and give us what we need to fulfill that mission and orchestrate things so we can do what He's calling us to do.

## ✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In his arrest and speeches before the Jews and the Sanhedrin, Paul boldly proclaimed the gospel without concern for his own safety. He trusted that God would orchestrate the events so Paul could be in front of the audiences God wanted him to preach to. In chapter 21, when he was arrested, Paul didn't demand to be released, though he legally could have, because he knew he needed to preach the gospel to the Jews who were attacking him. In chapter 22, he preached the gospel to the Jews, trying to meet them where they were, speaking their language and sharing his testimony of how Jesus changed his life. Though he could have demand to be released again, he didn't because he knew God wanted him to speak before the Sanhedrin. In chapter 23, before the Sanhedrin, Paul used their own division against them, then the tribune helped him escape their murder plot so he could go to Felix and share the gospel there to an even

more influential audience. In all of it, Paul trusted in Jesus, spoke the truth boldly, and followed wherever He led, even if it meant danger for himself.

1. *Paul's Arrest*

2. *Paul's Speech to the Jews*

3. *Paul Before the Sanhedrin*

## [GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 21:15–23:35.

### 1. *Paul's Arrest*

#### ✦ READ ACTS 21:15–40.

**QUESTION** *Why were the Jews in Jerusalem upset with Paul? What was their misunderstanding?*

**QUESTION** *How did their anger turn violent? Why might they have felt justified in their violence?*

Paul and his coworkers went to Jerusalem, even though they knew it would be dangerous for him there. In Jerusalem, they stayed with Mnason of Cyprus, one of the earliest disciples (like Barnabas) of the church from the time of Pentecost. His name means “remembering.” The church at Jerusalem received them gladly. Paul shared all God had done through them among the Gentiles, and the Jerusalem church leaders rejoiced. There was no conflict between Paul and the Jerusalem church leaders. In verse 25, the Jerusalem leaders even mentioned the decision they had made together at the Jerusalem Council and the letter they had sent to the Gentile churches (Act 15). This was 59 AD, eleven years after the Jerusalem Council (48 AD), and Paul and the Jerusalem church leaders were still on the same page about this issue.

But some Jewish Christians who were “zealous for the law” were upset because they had been told Paul was not only teaching that Gentiles didn’t have to be circumcised but also teaching Jewish Christians to forsake all Jewish practices, customs, and laws completely (v. 21). We know that’s not true, because Paul took a Nazarite vow in Acts 18:18. From the way the Jerusalem leaders talked to Paul about it, it sounds like they had been trying to dispel this rumor, that Paul wasn’t doing anything wrong and they all agreed

with him, but they hadn't been listening. They suggested Paul show them by participating in the Nazirite vow purification ceremony of four men who were under a vow at this time. Paul didn't have to do this, but it showed his willingness to "become all things to all people" to meet people where they are with the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:20–22).

James said there were "many myriads" of Jews in Jerusalem who had come to faith in Jesus. "Myriad" can mean "ten thousand" or, figuratively, an indefinitely large number of people, too large to count. This would have been a significant percentage of the Jewish population in Jerusalem. The church had done a good job spreading the gospel in Jerusalem.

Paul said he "became all things to all people" in order to win some for the gospel. He described living like a Gentile with the Gentiles and living like a Jew with the Jews. He interacted with Greek philosophers in the lecture halls and the Athenians in the Areopagus, speaking their language to share the gospel and meet them where they are. And he circumcised Timothy, even though he didn't believe Timothy should have to be circumcised, because he knew not doing so would be a stumbling block for the Jews they would be trying to witness to on their journey. Paul knew he didn't have to follow the Mosaic law, even as a Jewish Christian, but he had no problem doing it if it would take away a stumbling block for the gospel to these Jews in Jerusalem.

Paul did as they suggested, and yet it still backfired on him. When the Jews from Asia (ironically where he had just been on his last missionary journey) saw him in the temple, they stirred up the crowd against him. They dragged him out of the temple and started beating him with the intent to kill him until the Roman tribune heard Jerusalem was in confusion and sent his soldiers and centurions down to stop the commotion. This may seem like a crazy overreaction to our modern minds. This kind of violence doesn't seem fitting of people who profess to follow God. But by Old Testament law, blasphemy was punishable by death. Just as Saul, before his Damascus-road encounter, believed he was doing God's work by stoning Stephen, these Jews believed beating Paul was a righteous crusade. However, if what they were doing had been righteous, they would have waited for a trial before the Sanhedrin; they wouldn't have just started beating him on the spot. This was not a righteous act of justice; it was a riot.

A tribune was the commander of the local cohort of 600 soldiers permanently housed in the fortress Antonia on the northern part of the temple mount. From their tower, the guards would have easily seen the commotion. Since it says "centurions" (plural), he took at least 160 soldiers (centurions commanded groups of 80–100 soldiers) but it could have been hundreds more. This was no small commotion. The tribune arrested Paul and ordered him to be bound with two chains before he even asked who he was or what he did. Later in the story, he would learn Paul was a Roman citizen and binding him was against the law (22:25–29). He had just been trying to stop the commotion, but he shouldn't have assumed anything, he should have asked first.

Instead of asking Paul, the tribune asked the crowd who he was and what he had done—another mistake. The crowd all started shouting different things, and he couldn't make sense of it, so he ordered Paul to be brought to the barracks of their fortress. The mob followed, crying out, "Away with him!" The crowd was so violent that Paul had to be carried by the soldiers for his safety. Again, this was not a small crowd; it was hundreds, if not thousands, of angry rioters.

As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he asked the tribune to speak to him. The tribune was surprised he knew Greek because he had assumed he was someone else—an Egyptian who had recently led a revolt against the temple of 4,000 Sicarii or "dagger men," fanatic Jewish patriots who organized political killings. Surprisingly, at this point, Paul still did not reveal he was a Roman citizen; he told him he was a Jew from Tarsus, which he called "no obscure city." Tarsus was a prominent city, and his citizenship there (not just residency) would have been a point of honor, even if he had not yet revealed his Roman citizenship. Also, emphasizing that he was a Jew would have made it more likely for the Roman tribune to let him address the crowd; it would be addressing his own people. Instead of demanding his release, which he could have done as a Roman citizen, he asked to speak to the crowd, because his goal was not his own safety, it was sharing the gospel. The true, full gospel that was inclusive of Gentiles, not just Jewish Christians.

**QUESTION** *Why is it so easy for big mobs of people to get riled up, sometimes not even realizing exactly what they're angry about? What part does misinformation play in mobs and riots like this? What about emotion? What about gossip?*

**QUESTION** *What was Paul trying to do by "becoming all things to all people"?*

**APPLICATION POINT #1** / Paul said he "became all things to all people" in order to win some for the gospel. He adapted his behavior, mindset, and presentation of the gospel to reach different audiences effectively, to speak their language and meet them where they were. Like Jesus became one of us in the incarnation, we should also become like those we are trying to reach with the gospel. For a foreign missionary that means learning the language and living immersed in their culture, not like a foreigner separate from their culture. For those of us who try to live missionally at home, this means not separating ourselves from the world into a "holy huddle" but living in the world as a light to the world. Meeting people where they are and speaking their language. Entering their world the way Jesus came to us.

**APPLICATION POINT #2** / This story shows us how a big mob of people got so riled up they were about to kill Paul. It started with misinformation. They thought he was teaching something he wasn't. They mistakenly thought he had brought a Gentile into the temple. It was exacerbated by emotion—shouting, stirring up



the crowd, violence, anger. This can happen to all of us so easily when we are caught up in a crowd. It can happen in person, but these days we see it happen so quickly and easily on social media. How often do you hear or see something, get angry, and share it before you even know if it's true? Experts say we live in "The Age of Outrage." We are so polarized and everyone gets outraged so easily that some even say we're addicted to outrage. Social media algorithms and news media headlines are even set up that way, to get us outraged, because they know that will give them more clicks and shares.

**QUESTION** *Choose three different people with whom you would like to share the gospel (or places, like at school, at the grocery store, at the homeless shelter, etc.). How can you become like them and enter their world the way Jesus did with us?*

**QUESTION** *Reflect on your own tendency to be "outraged" quickly at things you hear on the news, see on social media, or see out in the world in person. Why does this happen? What are your triggers? Now reflect on your tendency to share your outrage and let it grow into a mob, either in person or online. Or get caught up in others sharing their outrage. How can we stop ourselves from doing that? How can we stop others from doing that?*

## 2. Paul's Speech to the Jews

### ✚ READ ACTS 22

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul talk about his childhood, training, and past as a persecutor of the church? How might knowing his backstory affect his audience?*

**QUESTION** *What did Jesus tell Paul in the vision when he was praying in the temple? What does this tell us about this crowd?*

As a Roman citizen, Paul could have simply demanded his release and been on his way, with a Roman guard even leading him to safety out of the city. But his goal wasn't his own safety, it was to resolve this issue in the church, this division and misunderstanding of the gospel. His defense wasn't about himself, his own merit or good works, it was about his encounter with Jesus and God's calling on his life, God's mission. The crowd hadn't given him a chance to defend himself; they had just started beating him without

a trial. The safe thing for Paul to do would have been to tell the tribune he was a Roman citizen and get out of there. Instead, he asked to address the crowd, to present his defense. This wasn't really about making his case; he didn't care about his own safety. It was about giving the crowd a chance to hear his testimony and change their minds.

In his defense, Paul spoke to them in Hebrew, which calmed them down. They began to listen because he was speaking their language. He described his upbringing and identity, showing he was just like them—actually, one of the best and brightest among them. A Jew, born in Tarsus (a noble city) but brought up in Jerusalem, educated by Gamaliel, the top rabbi at the time. He emphasized “according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers”; he also had believed in strict observance of the law just like they did. He described himself as zealous for God “as all of you are this day.” He was identifying himself with his audience even though they had just been beating him—I was just like you. What you just did to me—I’ve done the same thing to so many others. He described the way he had persecuted to the death followers of the Way and took pride in that as righteous justice. He understood why they did what they did.

But then he met Jesus. He told them all about the road to Damascus and how Ananias had told him he would be a witness for Jesus to everyone of what he had seen and heard. But then when he came back to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, he fell into a trance and saw Jesus, who told him to get out of Jerusalem quickly because the people there would not accept his testimony about Him. He responded that he thought they would believe him because of his status as the one who had been persecuting the church. But Jesus said He would send Paul far away from them, among the Gentiles.

This is the moment they stopped listening and called for him to be killed, when he mentioned the mission to the Gentiles. Just as Jesus had told Paul, they refused to hear his testimony. It didn't matter that he used to be one of them. The crowd started to get riled up again, shouting and throwing off their cloaks, a symbolic response to hearing blasphemy. They flung dust into the air, a sign of mourning. The tribune ordered him to be brought to the barracks to be interrogated “by flogging,” torturing him until he told them the truth about what was going on, why this crowd was so angry with him.

This is when Paul finally revealed his Roman citizenship. He waited until the very last moment, until he was bound and about to be whipped. This gave him the legal room to maneuver against them, as even binding a Roman citizen was against the law. He didn't make a scene or shout or demand, he simply asked, “Is it lawful ...?” The centurion stopped immediately and went to the tribune. When the tribune asked Paul about his citizenship, we learn that the tribune had bought his Roman citizenship, but Paul was a citizen by birth; he had a higher status. The interrogators left, and the tribune was afraid.

Yet the tribune didn't let him go. He kept him bound until the next day because he wanted to bring him before the Sanhedrin, since it was the Jews who were accusing him. The tribune recognized that the

crowd's issue with Paul was religious, not political, so he brought him to the Sanhedrin. As a Roman citizen, Paul could have demanded release, but he didn't. He wanted to go before them. He wanted to share his testimony.

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul try to identify with the crowd in his speech? What was he trying to accomplish?*

**QUESTION** *What does it tell us about Paul that he didn't demand his release when he could have? What was he trying to accomplish?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Twice in this story so far Paul could have demanded his release on the basis of his Roman citizenship. But he didn't, because he didn't care about his own safety. His goal wasn't to escape but to share the gospel. Even though he was pretty sure they would reject his message, he wanted to share his testimony with the crowd and then, in the next chapter, speak before the Sanhedrin. Paul was not concerned about his own safety; he just wanted to share the gospel. His whole life was about sharing the gospel. It was his only reason for living. Most of us don't face physical danger for sharing the gospel, but we can still ask ourselves if we have this kind of passion for sharing the gospel. Is it our life's purpose? Is our life centered on sharing the gospel and building God's kingdom?

**QUESTION** *Reflect on your own passion for sharing the gospel. How is your life centered on God's mission? What sacrifices do you make to live on mission for the gospel?*

**QUESTION** *If someone looked at your life from the outside, what would they think your life's mission is? Your purpose and calling? What could they use as evidence for that view?*

### 3. Paul Before the Sanhedrin

#### ✚ READ ACTS 23

**QUESTION** *How did Paul use the Pharisees and Sadducees disunity against themselves?*

**QUESTION** *How many soldiers did the tribune send to protect Paul in getting away from Jerusalem? What does this tell us about the level of danger he believed Paul was in?*

Paul began his defense by saying he had lived his life before God in good conscience up to that day. When he was persecuting Christians, he had a clean conscience about it. He believed he was doing the right thing because he didn't yet know better. Now that he was living on mission for the gospel, he did it with a clear conscience, knowing his calling was from the Lord. By saying this, he was giving them grace. He understood they had beaten him in good conscience; he didn't fault them for it, because they thought they were doing God's will. But they didn't get that. They just heard him say what he was doing now was in good conscience, which they didn't agree with, and they reacted. The high priest ordered him to be struck on the mouth.

Paul responded by calling him a "whitewashed wall," reminiscent of Jesus calling the Pharisees "whitewashed tombs" that looked good on the outside but on the inside were full of dead people's bones (Matthew 23:27). Paul also said God would strike the high priest and pointed out the irony that he was judging Paul according to the law yet was breaking the law by ordering him to be struck without a trial (Deuteronomy 25:1–2). When the crowd challenged him for reviling God's high priest, Paul said he didn't realize he was the high priest. The high priest sat in a special place and wore distinctive robes, so it's unlikely he didn't realize who he was. Even if Paul had some vision impairment, as some scholars have suggested, he knew the person who ordered the striking would have been the high priest. This shows he was speaking sarcastically, implying that a high priest who was truly "God's high priest" wouldn't behave this way. He had already shown how the high priest was breaking the law. If he had been a godly leader who was doing things right, Paul would not have reviled him (Exodus 22:28).

At this point, Paul saw that the Sanhedrin contained both Sadducees and Pharisees and deduced that he could incite a disagreement between them and essentially "divide and conquer." The Pharisees and Sadducees were known for disagreeing, especially over the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees believed that at the end times, all would be resurrected and judged, and the righteous would enter the eternal kingdom of heaven. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection; they thought this life was all there is, and when you die, that was it. Paul announced to the Sanhedrin that he was a Pharisee, and

the reason he was on trial was with respect to the hope of the resurrection of the dead. This caused a huge uproar, with the whole council loudly arguing with each other, including some of the Pharisees standing up and saying they saw nothing wrong with this man; they believed his testimony, that an angel or spirit could have spoken to him.

It may have looked like he could have been found innocent, but then the dissension became violent, and the tribune was afraid they would tear Paul to pieces. So, he sent his soldiers to take him away by force back to the barracks. The next night, Jesus appeared to him and told him to “take courage” because he would now go testify about Jesus in Rome just as he had done in Jerusalem. These words remind us of all the times God told His leaders to “be strong and courageous” before battle, always promising He would be with them and give them the strength (Deuteronomy 31:6–8; Joshua 1:9; 1 Chronicles 28:20; et. al.). This vision reminds us that Paul had completed his mission in Jerusalem, to testify about Jesus before the Jews and the Sanhedrin. This is why he didn’t try to escape or demand release though he could have.

The next day, more than forty of the Jews made a plot against Paul, making an oath that they would not eat or drink till they had killed him. They asked the Sanhedrin to ask the tribune to send Paul back to them to continue his trial, and they would kill him along the way. These were the Sicarii, who believed assassinations like this were their calling from God. Ironically, the tribune had thought Paul was the leader of one of these revolts, but instead, he was their target.

But Paul’s nephew heard about their plan, went to the barracks, and told Paul. Paul told the centurion, and he brought Paul’s nephew to the tribune. The tribune helped Paul escape to Felix, the governor in Caesarea, so he could have a real trial. The tribune sent 200 soldiers, a third of his troops, with seventy horsemen and 200 spearmen to escort him to Caesarea. This was a huge escort; he clearly believed Paul was in great danger. They left at 9:00 pm, under the cover of night, both for protection and so they could be back by the next day, not leaving their fortress vulnerable for very long. The soldiers escorted him part of the way and let the horsemen take him the rest of the way so they could get back. The tribune sent a letter with him to Felix explaining the situation, saying he was sending Paul to Felix so his accusers could state their case before him in a real trial. When Felix learned Paul was a Roman citizen from Tarsus in Cilicia, he promised to give Paul a proper hearing when his accusers arrived. He commanded Paul to be guarded until then.

The danger to Paul had escalated even more. The tribune protected him because he was a Roman citizen, but he also saw that the crimes Paul was being accused of were religious ones within the Jewish faith over which he had no jurisdiction. Yet, he would not allow the Sanhedrin to attack Paul or the Sicarii to ambush him. Meanwhile, Paul had allowed himself to suffer this persecution and violence because his mission was to share the gospel with the Jewish crowd and the Sanhedrin. Now, by going through the Roman court, he would also be able to share the gospel with the governor Felix, then Herod Agrippa, king of Israel, and eventually even at the palace in Rome. In Philippians, which he wrote from prison in Rome, Paul

would say he rejoiced in his imprisonment because it gave him the opportunity to share the gospel with the whole palace guard and other people of influence in Rome. And his commitment to share the gospel without fear, even while in chains, had inspired others all over the world to proclaim the gospel without fear (Philippians 1:12–14). Paul had been fulfilling his mission to take the gospel to the Gentiles all over the world for decades. Now his mission had taken him to these places of great influence—the Sanhedrin, governors, kings, emperors—which had greater impact but also greater risk. But Paul was not afraid. This was his sole purpose in life, and dying from it would only be all the better because he would be with Jesus (Philippians 1:21).

**QUESTION** *How did God protect Paul's life through all this danger? How did God orchestrate Paul getting an audience before this group of Jews, the Sanhedrin, and the governor?*

**QUESTION** *What does this tell us about how God will orchestrate things for the mission He has for us?*

**QUESTION** *What does it tell us about trusting God even when faced with danger?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Someone with less faith may have tried to protect themselves from this danger or tried to escape danger too soon, but Paul trusted that God had a mission for him and would orchestrate things so he could preach the gospel to those God had called him to. He knew it might involve danger to himself, but he was okay with that, because he was solely focused on the mission. This story shows us we can trust that when God calls us to something, He will protect us through it, give us the courage to get through it, and orchestrate things so we can accomplish our mission. That doesn't mean we won't experience any pain. Paul was beaten and imprisoned. But those things were necessary to get him in front of these audiences to preach the gospel. God gave him the strength and courage to persevere and even find joy in it all. Paul had complete faith in Jesus and followed Him wherever He led.

**QUESTION** *What is God calling you to do? What mission has He given you? How has He equipped you for this mission? How is He orchestrating things so you can fulfill it?*

**QUESTION** *How can you trust God even if the mission takes you through dangerous places? How can you know where He is leading you?*

## [NEXT STEPS]

Paul followed Jesus on mission for the gospel no matter the danger to himself. He trusted that God would protect him enough to be able to fulfill his mission, but he might also have to endure danger to fulfill the mission. This week, reflect on your mission from God. How are you participating in the Great Commission given to all believers in your own unique situation, with your own gifting and calling? How can you trust Jesus and follow Him, even through danger and persecution, to fulfill that mission? If you don't already have a clear picture of your unique personal mission from God, pray for His vision to see it.

## [PRAY]

*+Pray for God to reveal your personal mission to you. How He is leading you to fulfill the Great Commission in your own little corner of the world, and/or how may He be calling you to step outside of that comfort zone to fulfill His mission? Be specific in asking Him to show you where He is calling you. Pray for strength and courage to do what He is calling you to do.*

*Pray the following psalm as a prayer for strength and courage to fulfill God's call on your life:*

### **Psalm 31: To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.**

**31** *In you, O Lord, do I take refuge;  
let me never be put to shame;  
in your righteousness deliver me!*

**2** *Incline your ear to me;  
rescue me speedily!*

*Be a rock of refuge for me,  
a strong fortress to save me!*

**3** *For you are my rock and my fortress;  
and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me;*

**4** *you take me out of the net they have hidden for me,  
for you are my refuge.*

**5** *Into your hand I commit my spirit;  
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.*

**6** *I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,  
but I trust in the Lord.*

**7** *I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love,  
because you have seen my affliction;  
you have known the distress of my soul,*

**8** *and you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;  
you have set my feet in a broad place.*

**9** *Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;  
my eye is wasted from grief;*

my soul and my body also.  
 10 For my life is spent with sorrow,  
 and my years with sighing;  
 my strength fails because of my iniquity,  
 and my bones waste away.  
 11 Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach,  
 especially to my neighbors,  
 and an object of dread to my acquaintances;  
 those who see me in the street flee from me.  
 12 I have been forgotten like one who is dead;  
 I have become like a broken vessel.  
 13 For I hear the whispering of many—  
 terror on every side!—  
 as they scheme together against me,  
 as they plot to take my life.  
 14 But I trust in you, O Lord;  
 I say, "You are my God."  
 15 My times are in your hand;  
 rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!  
 16 Make your face shine on your servant;  
 save me in your steadfast love!  
 17 O Lord, let me not be put to shame,  
 for I call upon you;  
 let the wicked be put to shame;  
 let them go silently to Sheol.  
 18 Let the lying lips be mute,  
 which speak insolently against the righteous  
 in pride and contempt.  
 19 Oh, how abundant is your goodness,  
 which you have stored up for those who fear you  
 and worked for those who take refuge in you,  
 in the sight of the children of mankind!  
 20 In the cover of your presence you hide them  
 from the plots of men;  
 you store them in your shelter  
 from the strife of tongues.  
 21 Blessed be the Lord,  
 for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me  
 when I was in a besieged city.  
 22 I had said in my alarm,  
 "I am cut off from your sight."  
 But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy  
 when I cried to you for help.  
 23 Love the Lord, all you his saints!  
 The Lord preserves the faithful  
 but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride.  
 24 Be strong, and let your heart take courage,  
 all you who wait for the Lord!



# *Paul before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa*

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

Reflect on the people you have the opportunity to share the gospel with. Who is in your circle of influence? Who do you interact with on a daily basis? What is their circle of influence? How many people could they impact? If you were to share the gospel with all those people, and they shared it with all their circles of influence, what kind of impact would that make?

Read Acts 24–26.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you see what kind of gospel impact you can make on the world by sharing your testimony.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Disciples of Jesus aren't afraid to share the gospel with anyone, even very powerful or highly influential people.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

In Paul's speeches to Felix, Festus, and Agrippa, Paul came before the three most powerful people in his area at the time. And he boldly shared the gospel. He spoke the truth, but he met each of them where they were. None of them accepted Christ. But that's okay, the message got out there. Scripture tells us we aren't responsible for people's response to our message; we are just responsible for sharing it. We plant the seeds and water the seeds, but it is God who makes it grow. All we can do is share the message in the most effective, loving-yet-strong way possible. And leave the heart change to God.

### ✦ MEDITATE

Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" (Acts 26:28).

## [GETTING STARTED]

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

**QUESTION** *Reflect on times you have seen people in our culture get an opportunity to share the gospel on a wide public platform in front of influential people? What did they say? How did it go?*

**QUESTION** *With social media, we all have a somewhat public platform. What does it look like for us to be careful about how we use that platform to share the gospel?*

This section is all about Paul having the opportunity to share the gospel with influential people—the governor Felix, the governor Festus, and King Herod Agrippa II. Paul had been sent to Felix by the Roman tribune because the Sanhedrin and the Sicarii had a plot to murder him on his way to a fake trial. As a Roman citizen, he had a right to a fair trial. When Paul shared the gospel before these men, he didn't give an elaborate theological or apologetic argument. He simply shared his testimony. This was fitting for the situation. He was on trial, of course he was sharing his testimony. But it was also a non-threatening way to share the gospel, testimony as opposed to debate. His story was much more convincing and intriguing to them than an argument. When he presented his case before Felix, Felix avoided making a decision but discussed the faith with Paul for two years while he waited in prison. When Festus took over Felix's position after two years, Festus also didn't want to make a decision, so he suggested sending him back to the Sanhedrin, at which point Paul appealed to Caesar. Then he came before Herod Agrippa II. Agrippa and Festus agreed he was innocent and could have been let go if he hadn't appealed to Caesar. But this was all part of God's plan for Paul, as Jesus had told him in his vision. Though it meant imprisonment and suffering, Paul wanted to go to Rome so he could spread the gospel even further there.

## ✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+ When Paul appeared before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa, he gained the opportunity to share the gospel with some very influential people. He didn't make a theological argument; he simply shared his testimony of what happened to him—how Jesus appeared to him and God called him into ministry. Felix was very intrigued by what Paul had to say and continued to discuss the faith with him for two years while he was imprisoned, awaiting a decision that never came. When Festus took over for Felix, he was not as amenable to Paul's message and threatened to send him back to Jerusalem to please the Jews, so Paul appealed to Caesar. Then King Herod Agrippa II arrived, and Paul was able to share the gospel with him.

Agrippa seemed very knowledgeable about the Scriptures and how they pointed to Christ, but he scoffed at the idea that Paul could persuade him so quickly. Festus and Agrippa agreed Paul was innocent and would have been able to go free if he hadn't appealed to Caesar. So, Paul stayed in chains, but that was exactly what God had planned.

1. *Paul before Felix*

2. *Paul before Festus*

3. *Paul before Herod Agrippa*

## [GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 24–26.

### 1. *Paul before Felix*

#### ✚ READ ACTS 24.

**QUESTION** *What did the Jewish religious leaders accuse Paul of? Why was this inaccurate?*

**QUESTION** *How did Paul explain that the Way wasn't just a sect of Judaism? What did he say it was?*

Marcus Antonius Felix was the Roman governor of Judea from 52–60 AD, appointed by emperor Claudius. Felix and his brother Pallas had been slaves of Claudius's mother, Antonia, but had been freed. It was very unusual by Roman standards to appoint a freedman to a post like this, but both Felix and his brother were favorites of Claudius. Pallas had an even higher role as secretary of the treasury. Felix's rule was marked by cruelty, corruption, and unrest. The Roman historian Tacitus described him as ruling with "the power of a king but the mind of a slave," great authority without noble character and wisdom. Felix ruled with extreme violence, deceit, and bribery. We can see his tendency toward corruption in this story, both in hoping Paul would pay him off to get out of prison and in keeping him in prison for two years with no verdict when he knew he wasn't really guilty of anything.

Drusilla was Felix's third wife. She was the daughter of Herod Agrippa I, who had died suddenly in Acts 12, and the sister of Herod Agrippa II and Bernice, before whom Paul testified later in this section. Felix had met her at Agrippa's palace and, struck by her great beauty, sent an emissary to convince her to break Jewish law by divorcing her husband and marrying him, a pagan. This is what Herodias had done before her, for which John the Baptist publicly condemned her.

When the high priest Ananias came, his spokesman Tertullus addressed Felix with flattery that was obviously fake if you know the historical context: He said 1) that through Felix they enjoyed much peace when he actually caused more conflict; 2) reforms were being made for their nation when Felix was actually making things worse for the Jews; 3) that they accepted all this with gratitude when they actually complained about Felix and rebelled against him; and 4) he asked for Felix "in your kindness" to hear their case briefly, while Felix was anything but kind. He was obviously trying to butter him up so he would find the case in their favor.

Then his accusations against Paul were false, that he 1) stirred up riots among the Jews, when in actuality others stirred up riots against him, and 2) tried to profane the temple, which he didn't. The only thing they said that was partly true was that he was "ringleader" of the "sect" of the Nazarenes. Paul responded that the first two accusations were simply not true, and they could not prove either one. Then he "confessed" that the last bit was sort of true, though the Way wasn't a sect. Paul still worshipped the God of their fathers, believing everything written in the Law and the Prophets, and had hope in the resurrection just as the Pharisees do. By this description, he was showing that the Way wasn't a sect of Judaism, it was the fulfillment of it—the final chapter, the hope in the resurrection. Then Paul told his story of what really happened. He hadn't profaned the temple; he was purifying himself in it. And he didn't cause the riot, some Jews from Asia did.

Felix had accurate knowledge of the Way, so he knew Paul was innocent. But he wanted to appease the Jewish leaders and try to get Paul to bribe him, so he put off deciding their case until the tribune came. After a few days, Felix and his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, sent for Paul to ask him about his faith in Jesus, but when he talked about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed, because he knew he had been cruel and unrighteousness, lacking in self-control. He sent Paul away and kept Paul imprisoned for two years without making a decision, hoping Paul would bribe him to be released. He sent for Paul often to talk to him about his faith, but there is no evidence he ever converted.

**QUESTION** *What was holding Felix back from accepting the gospel and following Jesus?*

**QUESTION** *Why might talking about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment specifically make Felix alarmed?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Paul was able to share the gospel with the governor of Judea, who was close with the emperor Claudius and had a great deal of influence in the empire. Felix was intrigued by what Paul had to say, but when he felt convicted by the gospel, instead of repenting and turning to God, he sent Paul away. Felix represents many people who are intrigued by the gospel but recognize that surrendering to Jesus means a loss of status, power, control of their lives, or simply the physical pleasure of sins they enjoy. They know on a deep level that what they are hearing is the truth, yet they refuse to submit themselves to it. Mere exposure to the truth and “adequate knowledge” of the gospel does not necessarily change the heart. God is looking for a heart change, for people to not only know about Him but come to know Him in faith.

**QUESTION** *Reflect on those you know who are intrigued by the gospel but just don’t seem to want to give their lives to Christ. What is holding them back? How can you show them that it is worth it?*

**QUESTION** *What do we learn from Paul about how to respond to false accusations?*

## 2. Paul before Festus

### ✚ READ ACTS 25:1-22

**QUESTION** *What was Paul’s defense before Festus?*

**QUESTION** *Why did Festus ask Paul if he wanted to be tried in Jerusalem instead (v. 20)?*

In 59–60 AD, two years after he had put Paul in prison, Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus, who was described as fair and reasonable, more just and capable than Felix. After a particularly violent episode in Caesarea, the Jewish leaders formally accused Felix of mismanagement and cruelty, and he was recalled to Rome to answer those charges. This was after Felix had Jonathan, the new high priest, assassinated by the Sicarii because he had threatened to report him to Ceasar (58 AD). Festus was from a freeborn Roman family, not a former slave. Festus was a peacemaker; he worked hard to suppress crime and uprisings with less corrupt methods than Felix had.

When Festus took over, Paul had already been imprisoned for two years. The Jewish leaders tried to get him to transfer Paul to Jerusalem for trial before the Sanhedrin, not because they wanted to put him on trial but because they were plotting to have him killed on the way. Festus told them they would have to come to Caesarea and make formal charges against him the proper way. The Jews came and made many serious charges against him that they could not prove. Paul simply responded that he had not committed any offense against the Jewish law, the temple, or against Ceasar. At this point, Festus asked Paul if he wanted to be tried in Jerusalem instead. Festus told Agrippa later that he did this because this seemed like a religious dispute rather than a crime, so they should work it out among themselves. But the text tells us Festus was trying to do the Jews a favor. Festus was playing politics.

And Paul called him on it. “I have done no wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well” (v. 10). Paul didn’t shy away from speaking the truth. Festus may not have been cruel like Felix, but he knew what the Jews would do if he sent Paul back to Jerusalem. Festus knew Paul was innocent, but he refused to make that verdict. Paul said he was already standing right where he should be tried as a Roman citizen, in Ceasar’s tribunal. Trials were conducted in public forums so citizens could observe the proceedings to ensure transparency and fairness. The right to a fair trial was a fundamental right of every Roman citizen, and Paul had not yet received that right. He had been held in prison for over two years without a conviction. This was not part of the due process he deserved, and he was reminding Festus of that. Paul could have had a case against Felix and Festus for not giving him his right to fair trial.

To keep Festus from doing something shady and transferring him to Jerusalem, which would have been illegal, Paul appealed to Ceasar. He wasn’t getting his fair trial here, even with the new governor. This would ensure he was tried fairly under Roman law. But he had another reason. Jesus had appeared to him in a vision and told him he would take his testimony to Rome. His appeal to Ceasar also gave him an opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus in the heart of the Roman Empire.

When Agrippa II and Bernice arrived at Caesarea, Festus laid Paul’s case before Agrippa, and in his words, we can see Festus’s reaction to the gospel. Festus told Agrippa that the charges the Jews brought against Paul weren’t real crimes, but just religious disputes “about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive” (v. 19). Festus said that was the impetus for him asking if Paul wanted

to go to Jerusalem to be tried there. He saw this as a religious dispute, not a criminal case. Felix was intrigued by the gospel, understood it accurately, but rejected it. But Festus didn't understand the gospel or didn't really seem to care. He seemed to not really listen to what they were talking about because it didn't concern him. His job was to judge whether Paul was guilty of a crime; this was just a religious dispute.

**QUESTION** *Why does it tell us about Festus that he was unconcerned with Paul's testimony once he saw it as a religious dispute among the Jews?*

**QUESTION** *Why didn't Festus understand what Paul was saying about the resurrection? How could he have understood it better?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Festus wasn't necessarily being intentionally dismissive of the gospel. He was there to do a job, which was to try a criminal case. When he figured out no crime had been committed, that they were just arguing theology, he stopped listening because it didn't concern him. He wasn't a Jew; why would he care about their internal theological disputes? Yet he missed an opportunity to hear the gospel and be saved because he thought what they were talking about didn't apply to him. How often do people today miss out on the chance to be saved because they tune out the gospel? Because they don't think this "religious stuff" applies to them? Because they just don't think it matters? They're not necessarily hostile to the gospel, they're just indifferent. More and more people in our culture feel that way. The "rise of the nones" is a phrase that refers to the increasing number of people in our culture who claim no religious affiliation. Some have some sense of spirituality, but many don't. And America has seen a simultaneous rise in apathy. Pastors say their top challenge with Gen Z is indifference. They just don't seem to care.

**QUESTION** *How can we reframe our presentation of the gospel for people who think religious stuff doesn't apply to them? How can we help them see their need for God?*

**QUESTION** *Why do you think some people feel apathetic about God or even spirituality?*

**QUESTION** *Reflect on times you may have felt spiritual apathy. What situations in your life may have contributed to that? How can you reignite spiritual passion when you feel apathetic?*

### 3. Paul before Agrippa

#### ✚ READ ACTS 25:23–26:32

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul say it was fortunate he was making his appeal before Agrippa?*

**QUESTION** *What did Agrippa accuse Paul of trying to do to him? Why?*

King Herod Agrippa II was the son of Herod Agrippa I (who was struck dead by God in Acts 12 for his pride and idolatry in allowing the people to worship him as a god). He was raised and educated in Rome, where he developed a close relationship with the Roman emperors Claudius and Nero. When his father died in 44 AD, he was only seventeen and considered too young to rule. Judea was placed under Roman governors as a province of Rome.

In 48 AD, Agrippa II was given authority over the affairs of the temple in Jerusalem, including appointing the high priest, though he didn't rule over Judea. In 50 AD, Claudius appointed him ruler of Chalcis, a smaller Syrian kingdom. In 53 AD, he was made ruler over the territories previously ruled by Herod Philip, an area northeast of the Sea of Galilee. In 55 AD, Nero added some areas of Galilee to his realm. Essentially, Agrippa II was a Jewish king in title and religious affairs, but his political control was limited to territories north and east of Judea. Judea itself stayed under Roman administrative control by governors. So, when Agrippa came to hear Paul's case, he didn't actually have the authority to do anything about it. He was just offering an ear for Festus, to help him write the report to Caesar; Festus did not know what to say. When he took office, Festus often sought Agrippa's expertise on Jewish matters.

During Agrippa II's reign, tensions grew between the Romans and the Jews until the Jews revolted in 66 AD. Agrippa II was conflicted. He was deeply tied to Rome. He was educated there, was loyal to the emperors, and was dependent on them for his power. But he also tried to present himself as a faithful Jew, observing traditions and maintaining ties to Jerusalem. When Paul said he felt fortunate to be making his defense in front of Agrippa because Agrippa knew the customs and controversies of the Jews, he meant it. Because of his involvement with the temple and religious life, Agrippa was familiar with all the ins and outs of Judaism.

Paul first said he grew up in the strictest party of Judaism, the Pharisees. Yet now he stood on trial because of his hope in the promise of God to their fathers. Paul was connecting to Agrippa on the basis of shared beliefs. They had the same hope in the promise of God, and Paul had seen this promise come true. He made another point of connection, belief that God raises the dead. He talked about how he used to



persecute Christians out of zeal for the Lord, just like these Jews were doing to him now. Then he described his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. His next line, “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,” is another point of connection, belief that God communicates to his prophets through visions. Paul was just being obedient to God, and for that, the Jews seized him and tried to kill him. But to this day he’d had the help that comes from God, showing this is all from God. Paul ended by saying he was only preaching what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass. His message wasn’t new; it was just the end of the story they all knew and believed.

Festus shouted that he was out of his mind, but Festus didn’t know the Jewish faith the way Agrippa did. Paul hadn’t laid it all out this way for Festus because Festus didn’t know about the Jewish faith, nor did he care. But Agrippa did know, and Paul said he believed that none of these things escaped his notice. Agrippa got it. Paul prodded him further—“Do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe” (v. 27). Agrippa pushed back, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” (v. 28). Paul answered that his desire was that everyone who heard him would become a Christian. Agrippa represents those people who have head knowledge about God but no heart knowledge, people who know all the theology and can even connect all the dots but still refuse to believe and turn to faith in Jesus.

Agrippa, Bernice, and Festus met together and agreed Paul was innocent. But they couldn’t let him go because he had appealed to Ceasar. He had to go to Rome. But that was just what Paul wanted, to share the gospel there too. Paul would preach the gospel to anybody. And though he never changed his core message, he changed the way he shared it to connect with different people in different ways, to meet them where they were. Paul wasn’t afraid to share the gospel with the most powerful people of his day, even though he was in chains on trial before them at the time. They controlled his fate, so if he made them angry, there was great danger. But Paul only saw great opportunity to spread the gospel far and wide. Imagine if any of these three men had said yes and become a Christian. Imagine the impact they could have had for the gospel. But even more than thinking about the impact, platform, or the size of his audience, Paul was simply being faithful to God. Going where God told him to go, sharing the message God gave him to share, come what may.

**QUESTION** *Why doesn’t knowledge of the Bible and theology automatically lead to faith? What else do you need?*

**QUESTION** *None of these three leaders responded positively to the gospel. What does this tell us about them? What would a positive response have looked like in each of their lives?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Agrippa knew a lot about God, the Bible, even the prophecies that pointed to Jesus. He could have probably sat down with Paul and mapped out how Jesus fulfilled each one of those prophecies. But still he refused to believe. We don't know the reason, perhaps just simply pride—"You think you can persuade me?" Regardless, Agrippa shows us that head knowledge about God, the Bible, and spiritual things does not always translate to heart knowledge.

**QUESTION** *Reflect on anyone in your life who has a great head knowledge of Scripture, but their lives haven't been changed by Jesus. How can you tell when someone has heart knowledge of Jesus and not just head knowledge?*

**QUESTION** *Reflect on Paul's method of speaking before these three rulers. What strategies did he use? What things did he keep the same and what did he do differently for each person?*

## [NEXT STEPS]

This section shows Paul sharing the gospel with three influential people who could have had a huge impact on the world, people who had a strong public presence. This week make a list of the people in your circles of influence, people with whom you interact where you live, work, and play. Pray for opportunities to share the gospel with them this week and then, when the opportunity arises, do it!

## [PRAY]

*+Pray for the influence of the church in the world. Pray that our testimonies will have great impact in the world around us, whether we are sharing with kings or slaves. Pray for the Lord to widen your circles of influence to give you more people with whom you can share the gospel.*

# *Paul's Journey to Rome*

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

Reflect on a time you followed Jesus into a scary situation. How did you know He was leading you? Why did you put your trust in Him? What happened as a result?

Read Acts 27–28.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to give you the passion and single-mindedness to make your life all about advancing the gospel, the way Paul's was.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Disciples of Jesus live on mission as His witnesses to the ends of the earth.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

The ending of Acts brings us back to the theme laid out at the beginning, being Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth. Paul went all the way to Rome, the center of the greatest empire in the world at the time. He would preach the gospel before Caesar himself. But the story ends before he got to speak to Caesar. It ends with a theologically interesting dichotomy. Paul's body was in chains, but he was preaching the gospel without hindrance. No matter what happened to his physical life or any of the disciples' lives, God's message would continue, even through their deaths. The story is not about our individual lives; it's about the mission of the church in the world. The kingdom of God is so much bigger than that. Each of our lives is but a single brick ("living stone") in the temple God is building, which is the church (1 Corinthians 3:10–17; 1 Peter 2:4–6). Our lives are not our own. Our mission, our purpose is to advance the gospel, build the kingdom, and grow the church.

### ✦ MEDITATE

"[Paul] welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:30b–31).

## [GETTING STARTED]

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

**QUESTION** *What would you say is the purpose of life as a Christian?*

**QUESTION** *How do you live it out? How can people see that purpose reflected in your life?*

In the final chapters of Acts, we see Paul's single-mindedness. His whole focus was to get to Rome to preach the gospel to Caesar. But he also preached the gospel at every point along the way. Paul's whole life was about advancing the gospel. His whole purpose was sharing Christ with the world. He rejoiced in his sufferings because they gave him greater opportunities to share the gospel. His arrest gave him opportunities to share the gospel with Felix and Drusilla, Festus, and Agrippa and Bernice. His shipwreck gave him the opportunity to share the gospel with the people of Malta, the prisoners, the sailors, and the soldiers with him on the ship. His imprisonment in Rome gave him the opportunity to share the gospel with the prison guards, the household of Caesar, and many more in Rome. Paul rejoiced at these things because the gospel was preached. He didn't care about his own life or safety. For him, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain." The question for all of us is, is this how we live our lives? Do we live on mission for the gospel as our primary purpose in life?

## ✦ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+ In Acts 27–28, we see Paul leaving Caesarea, in Judea, to go to Rome to plead his case before Caesar. Agrippa and Festus agreed they would have let him go if he hadn't appealed to Caesar, but because he had, they were required to send him to Rome. But this was part of God's plan for Paul, as Jesus had told him in a vision in Acts 23:11. Jesus wanted him to share his testimony in Rome as he had in Jerusalem. In Acts 27, Paul and his friends (including Luke) set sail for Rome and experience a lot of danger at sea. An angel appeared to Paul and told him they would lose the ship, but all the people would live. They were shipwrecked on the island of Malta, where the locals receive them kindly. When Paul was bitten by a snake with no symptoms, they believed he was a god. Then Paul healed everyone who came to him. They stayed there for three months, through the winter, and then set sail for Rome. When Paul arrived, he met with the Jewish leaders and shared the gospel. Some accepted it, some did not. Paul said the message would go to the Gentiles, and they would believe. The story ends by summarizing Paul's two years in Rome, bringing us back to the theme of Acts, the spreading of the gospel. Paul proclaimed the kingdom

of God and taught about Jesus “with all boldness and without hindrance.”

1. *Danger at Sea*

2. *Miracles in Malta*

3. *The Gospel in Rome*

## [GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 27-28.

### 1. *Danger at Sea*

#### ✚ READ ACTS 27

**QUESTION** *Why did the angel tell Paul their lives would be spared?*

**QUESTION** *Why did the soldiers want to kill the prisoners? Why did the centurion stop them?*

At the end of the last section, King Herod Agrippa II and the Roman governor Festus agreed they would have let Paul go if he hadn't appealed to Caesar, because there was no real evidence against him. He hadn't done anything wrong. But earlier, Paul had appealed to Caesar because Festus had threatened to send him back to Jerusalem to be tried before the Sanhedrin, and Paul knew that would be dangerous for him. They were plotting to kill him along the way, before he even got to the trial. Once he appealed to Caesar, Festus had no choice but to send him to Caesar. Agrippa couldn't actually do anything about Paul's verdict; he only listened to his testimony to help Festus write his letter to the emperor that accompanied Paul to Caesar.

So they sent Paul to Rome by boat with some other prisoners and a centurion named Julius, of the Augustan Cohort, which meant the cohort of the emperor. Augustus was not a name, but a title—"the revered one" or "the illustrious one." When Octavian became the first emperor, he took the name "Caesar Augustus." He was the emperor when Jesus was born. After him, every emperor adopted "Augustus" as part of their imperial title; it became almost synonymous with "emperor" like "Caesar" did. The emperor at the time of Paul's appeal was Nero, whose full title was Nero Claudius Ceasar Augustus Germanicus. A cohort was

a group of 600 soldiers, but not all of them went with the centurion on this journey. A total of 276 people were on the boat, including sailors, soldiers, and other prisoners, not just Paul (27:37). Luke was also on this journey; he used “we” throughout this story.

Luke described exactly where they went on their journey, which we could see on a map in any study Bible. Throughout the trip, they had difficult winds and had to keep sailing in the lee of different islands. The centurion had a lot of faith in Paul; he allowed him to go to his friends and be cared for when they landed at Sidon. Whether this was because the centurion himself trusted Paul or because Festus had told him that Paul was innocent, we don’t know. When they came to Myra in Lycia, they switched to a different ship. They continued slowly with great difficulty until they stopped at Fair Havens, near Lasea, on the southern coast of Crete. Fair Havens was exposed to the open sea, so it was not an ideal place to stop for the winter storm season. When Luke said “the Fast” was already over, he was referring to Yom Kippur, which falls in September/October. The captain wanted to continue to Pheonix, a larger and safer harbor that had more protection from the prevailing seasonal winds. Paul told them he perceived that journey would result in great loss, not only the cargo, but their very lives. But the centurion listened to the captain of the ship instead of Paul.

A heavy wind called a northeaster overcame them, and they struggled against it. They used supports to undergird the ship, lowered the gear, and started offloading cargo. An angel appeared to Paul and told him the Lord would protect their lives so Paul could testify before Caesar. God spoke to Paul in two different ways. The first time, Paul said, “I perceive ...” This was just a sense or feeling he had from the Lord. The second time, an angel appeared to Paul and spoke explicitly to him. God can speak to His people in a variety of ways, but those who are in communion with the Spirit know when God is speaking, whatever method He uses.

On the fourteenth night, about midnight, they thought they were getting close to land, so they took some depth measurements. When they got so close they were afraid they would run up on the rocks, they let down the anchors and prayed for day to come. Some of the sailors tried to escape in the lifeboat, but Paul told the centurion they would not be saved unless they all stayed in the boat. So, they cut away the lifeboats. What an act of faith!

As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them to eat. They hadn’t eaten for fourteen days; they needed strength. Paul promised that not a hair on their heads would be harmed. Then he took the bread, gave thanks to God, and broke it. This is the same language used in the feeding of the 5,000, the 4,000, and the Last Supper. They ate until they were full—all 276 of them—and there was still wheat leftover, also similar to those miraculous feedings. They threw the rest overboard to lighten the ship. When day broke, they set sail for the shore but hit a reef. The bow was stuck, and the stern was being broken up by the waves. The soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners so they wouldn’t escape, but the centurion stopped them

to save Paul. Those who could swim swam to shore and those who couldn't floated on parts of the ship, so they all were saved.

This story shows God's supernatural protection of Paul so he could fulfill his mission of sharing the gospel with Caesar. It also shows the faith of the centurion—at least in Paul, if not in Jesus. We don't know if he ever put his faith in Christ, but he certainly trusted Paul. God again used a Gentile military leader, like He did Cornelius and the tribune in Jerusalem, to protect His people and accomplish His will. Every time a centurion appears in Acts, they are portrayed as disciplined, fair, and often sympathetic to the apostles and the gospel.

The theological lesson is found in Paul's words to the crew in verse 21, "You should have listened to me." Not because Paul was wiser than they were about boats and weather patterns, but because he was speaking for God. His advice had been contrary to logic—don't go to the safer harbor. Yet it turned out the "safe" harbor wasn't safe because it wasn't where God told them to go. The safest place to be is in God's will, even if it may seem dangerous. Paul was a prisoner on this ship; it's not surprising that the captain didn't listen to his contrary-to-logic advice about where to go. But when he proved to be right, they started listening to him. And following Paul's advice kept their whole ship alive, not just Paul.

**QUESTION** *What does it tell us about God that He kept all the people on the ship—prisoners, soldiers, centurions— alive?*

**QUESTION** *In what ways did God speak to Paul in this story? How did Paul know where God was leading them?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / This story shows us that the safest place to be is in God's will. But it wasn't without any danger. They had to endure storms, not eating for two weeks, a shipwreck, and swimming/floating to shore! Yet God sustained them through the storms. God doesn't promise that we won't have any suffering, danger, or struggle. He promises He will work it out for our good in the end. He doesn't promise to keep us *from* the storms; He promises He will sustain us *through* the storms.

**QUESTION** *Reflect on times God has sustained you through a storm. How did God show you where to go? How did He keep you safe through the storm? How did He use the storm in your life, to teach you and/or grow you closer to Him?*

**QUESTION** *What does it look like to walk in faith, following God even when it may seem illogical or even dangerous? How can we know where God is calling us to go?*

## 2. *Miracles in Malta*

### ✚ READ ACTS 28:1-10

**QUESTION** *Why did the locals think Paul was a murderer at first? What changed their minds?*

**QUESTION** *Why might Paul being shipwrecked have been part of God's plan?*

Paul and the other 275 people on board were shipwrecked on Malta. Malta was a tiny island in the middle of the Mediterranean, just south of Sicily. At this time, it was under Roman control, and its inhabitants were bore a mix of Phoenician, Greek, and Roman influences. It was strategically located along the ancient trade routes between the eastern and western Mediterranean. The Maltese people were known for their seafaring skills and strategic position in maritime trade routes. They were also known for honey production (the name Malta is derived from the Greek word for honey).

When the shipwreck survivors first arrived, the Maltese people showed them “unusual kindness.” They kindled a fire and welcomed them all, regardless of their background—prisoners, soldiers, whatever. When Paul was gathering sticks for the fire, a viper bit him, fastening onto his hand. When the Maltese people saw it, they took it as a sign that he was a murderer, and the goddess Justice was punishing him. Dike or Dicaeosyne was the Greek goddess of justice and the spirit of moral order and fair judgment. She was depicted as a young, slender woman carrying a balance scale, wearing a laurel wreath. The modern American legal system uses this same imagery of Lady Justice in many courthouses, including the Supreme Court.



The Maltese people thought the snake meant Lady Justice was punishing Paul with death, but then he shook the snake off into the fire and nothing happened. They waited for him to swell up or drop dead, but he didn't. Then they believed he was a god. This story is reminiscent of the story of the plague of fiery serpents in the wilderness, when God healed His people from the venomous snakes when they looked to the bronze serpent in faith (Numbers 21:4–9). God has the power over venomous snakes; this proved God was with Paul.

After Paul showed this favor with God, the chief of the island, named Publius, offered his hospitality for Paul and his friends to stay with him for three days. Paul healed Publius's father, who was sick with fever and dysentery. Then the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They stayed there for three months, through the winter, and when they set sail, the people of Malta made sure they had everything they needed for the journey.

The book of Acts doesn't explicitly tell us whether these people accepted the gospel or not, but history tells us Paul's three-month stay on Malta was the beginning of the church there. Archaeological finds like catacombs, inscriptions, and Christian symbols like the fish and anchor suggest that Christianity spread on Malta within the first centuries. Christianity was suppressed by Arab rule in 870–1091, but it didn't disappear. In 1091, when the Normans conquered Malta, Christianity was restored as the island's dominant faith. Today Malta, more than 90 percent Catholic, is one of the most Catholic countries in the world. St. Paul is deeply revered, and the Feast of St. Paul's Shipwreck (February 10) is a national holiday. And it all began with an "accidental" shipwreck on a random tiny island. Except it wasn't an accident, and it wasn't random. This shipwreck was part of God's plan all along.

**QUESTION** *What does it tell us about God and His plans and purposes that this "accident" was used to bring many people on an isolated island to faith in Jesus?*

**QUESTION** *What does it tell us about God that He had a plan for the people of this tiny island in the middle of nowhere?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / If Paul hadn't been shipwrecked on this island, would these people in this remote area have ever heard about Jesus? This story shows us that what we may see as a bad thing, like a shipwreck, may be part of God's good plan to rescue the world. We see the same in Joseph's life in Genesis. His pain and suffering were part of God's bigger plan to rescue not only his family but the whole world from the famine. There are so many examples in Scripture of God using "bad" things to accomplish His good purposes. This story also shows us that God cares about every life on this planet. This was a tiny island in the middle of nowhere with a small population of people the rest of the world didn't even know

existed. Yet God had a plan for their salvation. He didn't forget about anyone. God doesn't leave anyone behind. God's desire is that every person on earth would be saved and come to knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). If we're going through a "shipwreck" situation in our lives, we need to ask ourselves how God might be using this to bring other people close to Him. How might He use this to share the gospel? To bring people to know Him? That's what really matters. If that happens, it's worth any suffering or pain we endure.

**QUESTION** *Share any time you've been through suffering or struggle, but it led to the gospel being preached or someone coming to know Jesus. Was it worth the suffering?*

**QUESTION** *When we are going through hard times, how can we look for what God is doing in us and through us? How can we see His plan and His purposes in our suffering?*

### 3. The Gospel in Rome

#### ✚ READ ACTS 28:11-31

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul call together the Jewish leaders when he got to Rome?*

**QUESTION** *Why did he say the Holy Spirit, through Isaiah, was right about them?*

When Paul and his friends set sail from Malta, they went on a ship with "the twin gods" as figureheads. Castor and Pollux, the twin sons of Zeus, were the patron gods of sailors. This created an intentional contrast. The Greek sailors trusted in Castor and Pollux for protection in the dangerous open sea, but it was the God of Israel who had protected Paul, the prisoners, and the crew in the storm and shipwreck.

They stopped at several places on the way. When they finally hit land at Puteoli, they found "brothers" (meaning other Christians) and stayed with them for seven days before heading northward to Rome. This terminology emphasizes the intimate nature of the early church. Believers were like extended family, even if they were from different places, even if they had just met. Luke wrote that the believers in Rome had heard Paul was coming and came to meet them and encourage them along the way. Paul was traveling from Puteoli to Rome along the Appian Way, Rome's first great highway, which ran from Rome to Capua and was used to move armies, officials, and goods quickly across southern Italy.

Along the Appian Way, the Forum of Appius was about forty miles from Rome, and the Three Taverns was about thirty miles, both about a day's journey if you traveled fast. The willingness of the believers to travel such a distance highlights their eagerness to support and welcome Paul. Paul thanked God for them and "took courage" from their presence; it gave him the strength to continue his mission. The presence of the body of Christ surrounding him at this point in the journey reminds us that God never abandons His servants but equips them and empowers them to carry out His mission.

When he came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay in his own rented home, on house arrest, with a soldier guarding him. This meant they really did not see him as a threat or a flight risk. But it also meant he had to provide for all his physical needs—food, shelter, etc.—while awaiting trial. For two years, this was no small expense. Thankfully, he had the support of several churches, one of which was in Philippi. He wrote the biblical letter to the Philippians while he was on house arrest in Rome, thanking them for sending financial aid and telling them he rejoiced for this time in prison because he was able to spread the gospel to even more people through it. Advancing the gospel was the only thing that mattered. Not his life or his safety, just the gospel (Philippians 1).

Three days after Paul arrived at Rome, he called together the local Jewish leaders and told them he had done nothing against "our people" or the customs of "our fathers," being sure to identify himself with them, yet he had been arrested in Jerusalem. The Roman officials had found him innocent and wanted to set him free, but because the Jews objected, he had appealed to Caesar. This is why he asked to speak with them; it was because of "the hope of Israel" that he was in chains. He identified with them as a fellow Jew and then pointed to Jesus as the hope of Israel, the Messiah their Scriptures prophesied.

The Jewish leaders said they had not heard anything from Judea about Paul. This is relatively surprising, considering how upset the Jews in Jerusalem were. You would think they would have reached out to the Jews in Rome to warn them about Paul, but they hadn't. They had heard nothing about him, but they had heard about the Way, and not good things, but that everywhere Jews spoke against it. But they said they wanted to hear Paul's views, so they set up a meeting, and many more of them came to hear. Paul expounded the Scriptures to them all day, morning to evening, testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to convince them from their own Scriptures, the law and the prophets, not only that Jesus was their promised Messiah but about His death and resurrection and the gospel of salvation by grace through faith.

Some were convinced; others weren't. Paul quoted the same prophecy from Isaiah that Jesus had quoted to the Jews of His day, that they would see but not understand because their hearts had grown dull. If they would see and hear and understand with their hearts and turn and repent, God would heal them. But many of their hearts were hardened. They would not see. But the message had gone out to the Gentiles, and they would listen. God's people were not one particular nationality; they were every person from any nation on earth who would turn to Him in faith. This is how the book of Acts ends. With this reminder

that God’s message was always for the whole world—for anyone who would listen, believe, repent, and turn to Jesus in faith. These final chapters show the gospel moving from Jerusalem to Rome, the center of the largest empire on earth at the time. Luke was signaling that God’s mission continues outward to all nations. God desires everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, to hear the good news.

The last two sentences of Acts tell us Paul lived in Rome for two years at his own expense. He was allowed any visitors, and he welcomed all who came to see him. We learn from Philippians that he witnessed to the whole palace guard and many others throughout Rome, including Caesar’s household (Philippians 1:13; 4:22). Acts doesn’t tell us about Paul appearing before Nero, but ancient historians like Eusebius said he defended himself successfully before Nero, was released, and embarked on new missionary journeys, making it all the way to Spain before he came to Rome a second time, where he was martyred under Nero. Instead, Acts ends with Paul on house arrest, but with a positive statement pointing us back to the theme of the book, which is being Christ’s witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The last verse says even though Paul was on house arrest, he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about Jesus with all boldness and without hindrance. This contrast was intentional and poignant. His body may have been in chains, but his message had no hindrance. In fact, Paul said in Philippians that his chains helped advance the gospel. Because of his chains, he was able to reach people he never would have met, like the palace guard and Ceasar’s household. Because of his chains, others were inspired to preach with boldness. God uses our weaknesses for His glory. Paul was in chains, yet from that place of limitation, God used him to preach, teach, and write letters that still impact the world today.

The ending of Acts is intentionally open ended, stopping before the ending of Paul’s story to hint at the fact that even when Paul was dead and gone, the message and the mission would go on. These final words show us God’s mission is unstoppable. Chains, opposition, government restrictions, shipwreck—nothing can stop God’s Word. God is sovereign over all things, and His purposes will be fulfilled.

**QUESTION** *How did God use Paul’s imprisonment to advance the gospel? What does it tell us about Paul that he rejoiced in his imprisonment?*

**QUESTION** *Reflect on the whole story of Acts. How did the Holy Spirit work through suffering, struggle, and persecution to advance the gospel? What does this tell us about how God works in our lives?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Acts ends without a resolution. Paul's trial isn't recorded, nor is his death. Instead, the last note is about the gospel going forward. The ending of Acts isn't a conclusion but a continuation. It's as if Luke was inviting the reader to step into the story. The mission of God didn't stop with Paul. It continues beyond the pages of Scripture, throughout church history, with us today. How will we participate in the work of God in the world? How will we fulfill His mission? How will we advance the gospel?

**QUESTION** *How has God used hard times in your life to create opportunities for you to share the gospel that you wouldn't have otherwise had? How have your sufferings affected your testimony?*

**QUESTION** *From beginning to end, this book is about Jesus's disciples being His witnesses, sharing the gospel all over the world. What does this tell us about what it means to be a Christian? How does this compare to the way most people in our culture would describe Christians?*

**QUESTION** *How will you continue the mission of the church as a disciple of Jesus? How can you find the passion and total commitment Paul had for advancing the gospel?*

## [NEXT STEPS]

The ending of Acts shows Paul as single-minded, completely focused on advancing the gospel. He completely trusted in God, following Him into dangerous situations, to fulfill his mission. This week, re-read the book of Acts, ideally in one sitting (give yourself enough time). Pray to be inspired by the acts of the apostles in this book and ask God to show you how you can carry on their mission in your life today.

## [PRAY]

+Pray for God to give you the heart Paul had for the mission; it was everything to him, the entire purpose of his life. Read Philippians 1, Paul's prayer and words to the Philippians about his imprisonment and then write your own prayer along the same lines, asking for the courage to share the gospel and rejoicing at the opportunities God has given you to share the gospel, even if they occurred in the midst of personal suffering.







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