



1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Acts, Part 2

Theme: The Church Goes Global

Overview: Shrunken spirits and miserly hearts have no place in God's global mission. His plans are always larger than ours (Genesis 1:28; 11:4, 9; 12:3; Isaiah 49:6; Daniel 7:13-14; Zechariah 9:9-10). Clearly God's mission for the church has always been worldwide. The International Conference on Missions realizes this; the theme for their gathering Nov. 15-17 in Oklahoma City is "Hope for the Nations." In Part 2 of this study from Acts, students will learn of this global mission by studying one family (Cornelius's household), a first journey (by Paul and Barnabas), and two cities (Ephesus and Rome).

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

INTRODUCTION

Author

Acts is the second volume of a two-part work by Luke, the “doctor” and traveling companion of Paul (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11). In his “former book” (the Gospel of Luke), he wrote about “all that Jesus began to do and to teach” (Acts 1:1). The “we” passages in Acts (e.g., Acts 16:10-17) show that Luke was an eyewitness to many of the events he recorded.

Audience

Like the Gospel of Luke, Acts is addressed to Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1), possibly a Roman official or patron, so that he might “know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4). Through him, Luke wrote for the wider church, both Jewish and Gentile believers.

Date

Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome for two years (Acts 28:30-31), so it was probably completed around AD 62. The events in this study span roughly AD 40–62, from Peter’s visit to Cornelius through Paul’s missionary journeys to his arrival in Rome.

Setting

The gospel moves beyond its Jewish roots to the Gentile world. Peter preaches to Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Caesarea. The church in Antioch of Syria sends Barnabas and Saul to Cyprus and southern Galatia. Paul spends more than two years in Ephesus, the leading city of the province of Asia, and finally reaches Rome, the capital of the empire, as a prisoner.

Theme

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). God does not show favoritism (Acts 10:34); the Holy Spirit leads the church to take the good news to every nation, and the book closes with Paul preaching the kingdom of God “with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31).

Why Study Acts?

God’s mission for the church has always been worldwide. This study calls believers to celebrate the inclusiveness of God’s love and grace, to find how God is calling them to take the gospel beyond their own locality, to pray that whole regions will hear the word of the Lord, and to pray that the gospel continues to go forward unhindered.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1: Acts 10:17-24, 34-48

WEEK 2: Acts 13:1-13, 26-31, 38-39

WEEK 3: Acts 19:8-10, 23-41

WEEK 4: Acts 28:11-31

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Celebrate the
inclusiveness of God's
love and grace.**

STUDY: Acts, Part 2

THEME: The Church Goes Global

LESSON TEXT: Acts 10:17-24, 34-48

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Acts 10:1-16, 25-33; 11:1-18

GENTILES ARE ADDED TO THE CHURCH

BY MARK SCOTT

Acts is the simplest and earliest name of this Bible book. The fuller and later title of the book, *Acts of the Apostles*, must probably give way to a more accurate name, *Acts of the Holy Spirit*. The main job of the Holy Spirit in Acts is to lead the church forward in its mission. When we arrive in our reading at Acts 10, we realize it is a big moment. The length of the narrative is one clue to its significance (Acts 10:1–11:18).

Luke's account of the beginning and growth of the church has led up to this point. Jesus promised that his witnesses would reach to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Peter said God would pour out his Spirit on all people (2:17). The saving name of Jesus is for everyone “under heaven” (4:12). Stephen's speech in Acts 7 helped the church to see how its message fulfilled its roots in Judaism, yet also unshackled it from them. Philip preached to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch (8:5, 34, 35). Peter stayed with a “tanner” named Simon while in Joppa (9:43), which prepared him for his heavenly vision and the Gentiles being added to the church.

The Spirit Said

Acts 10:17-23a

The Holy Spirit is a speaking Spirit. Like the Father and the Son, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (to co-opt the title of a book by Francis Schaeffer). Cornelius prayed regularly and God answered with an angel who instructed Cornelius to summon Peter to his Caesarean residence (Acts 10:1-8). God, in turn, prepared Peter via a vision as the apostle prayed on a rooftop in Joppa (10:9-16).

While Peter wondered about the meaning of the vision, the Spirit told Peter that *three men* had come for him, men whom the Spirit had sent.

The Spirit then told Peter to go downstairs and not *hesitate* (the Greek word used means discriminate or second guess) going with them because the whole event was being orchestrated by God.

Peter identified himself to Cornelius's men. They vouched for Cornelius's character and told Peter the events recorded earlier in the chapter. In a strange turn of events, Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests. That might not seem surprising in light of Ancient Near Eastern hospitality, but the ethnic ramifications are stunning.

The Spirit Anointed

Acts 10:23b-24, 34-43

Peter could not have been more fully prepared for the scene that awaited him. He arrived at Cornelius's house

and found everything in perfect order for the preaching of the gospel (Acts 10:25-33). Peter staying at the home of a tanner was wild, but a Roman soldier bowing to a Jewish fisherman was wilder still! Peter acknowledged he was out of his comfort zone, but God had dramatically changed his perspective.

That new perspective is seen in Peter's opening words in verse 34—God *does not show favoritism* (literally, does not regard the face). God accepts people from every nation, and so should the church. The biblical basis for such a radical first-century claim was rooted in Jesus' own ministry. The rest of Peter's sermon was about the Holy Spirit anointing Jesus to preach this all-embracing gospel. The *message* (word) God sent to the people of Israel was the *good news of peace* (see also Ephesians 2:11-22). That peace established through the complete work of Christ on the cross broke down barriers between Jew and Gentile.

Peter retraced the ABCs of Jesus' ministry. First there was the preaching of John the Baptist. Then came Jesus' baptism and empowerment (*anointing*) by the Holy Spirit to conduct his ministry. Jesus healed people and went about *doing good*. He died on Calvary's cross and was raised from the dead. Many people *witnessed* these things since they were not done in a corner (Acts 26:26). Peter claimed post-resurrection encounters with Jesus. Apostolic preaching would cause people to decide for or against Jesus. They could choose to be *judged* or *forgiven* by him.

The Spirit Came

Acts 10:44-48

It seems that Peter never got to conclude his message. Once the basic *kerygma* (Christian message or gospel) was shared, the Holy Spirit came. It was like reliving Pentecost. The *circumcised believers* (Jewish Christians) who had come with Peter were *astonished* that the Holy Spirit had accepted the Gentiles into the church before the church had accepted them.

One evidence of the Holy Spirit's descent was speaking in *tongues* (or known human languages, so that all the Gentiles could understand the gospel). Peter—perhaps the most “kosher” of all disciples—recommended water baptism since these events were identical to what had occurred in Acts 2. The events in Acts 10 marked a significant milestone in the progress of the gospel message.

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GO WHEREVER GOD SENDS YOU

BY DAVID FAUST

I spent a week in Turkey last summer. My travel group toured Istanbul and visited the sites of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3. In every town, Muslim calls to prayer rang in the air five times a day, amplified by loudspeakers from local mosques.

The journey increased my appreciation for first-century missionaries and for the brave believers serving Jesus in Turkey today. Our tour was tiring, even though we had air-conditioned buses and modern hotels. Imagine what it was like for the apostles who traveled on foot or by boat. Paul wasn't kidding when he wrote about facing danger in the city, the country, and the sea (2 Corinthians 11:26). Yet, God's first-century ambassadors went wherever he sent them to spread the good news.

Messages Tailored to the Churches' Needs

Jesus tailored each of his Revelation letters to the specific circumstances of the seven churches. At Pergamum, we took a cable car to the top of an 1,100-foot-high hill and viewed the ruins of pagan temples, theaters, and intimidating Roman military installations that overshadowed first-century Christians like a devilish throne and threatened their safety every time they looked up. Christ assured the believers in Pergamum, "I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name" (Revelation 2:13). He knows where we live, too.

We saw hot springs flowing from the ground at Hierapolis and a cold-water spring near the site of ancient Colosse. Nearby, we toured the ruins of first-century Laodicea, where Christ's followers were neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm (Revelation 3:15-16).

Changing Circumstances

Time has changed those ancient cities. Hierapolis receives only a passing mention in the New Testament—a quick reference in Colossians 4:13—but impressive archaeological remains show that it was a thriving metropolis in the first century. I walked across the site of Colosse, which is now a field covered with thistles.

Ancient Smyrna, however, has become a thriving metropolis known as Izmir, and our departing flight left from its modern airport. Over the centuries, these areas were altered by political and economic factors and by earthquakes and fires. Some cities thrived and grew, while others declined and eventually disappeared.

If the Lord delays his return and visitors tour our communities 2,000 years from now, will they see the abandoned remains of our theaters, stadiums, and malls? What will our church buildings look like then?

I'm thankful for congregations that thrive in growing communities, but what about Christ's faithful followers who serve in places where declining job markets and depressed economies have caused residents to move away? Across the globe, some local churches reap the benefits of explosive population growth, financial prosperity, and favorable governmental policies, while many other congregations struggle to accomplish their mission under adverse conditions. Without making excuses for non-growth, let's humbly recognize that local churches are affected by political shifts, natural disasters, and spiritual dynamics invisible to human eyes. Lost souls need Jesus, whether they live in America or in the Middle East—in booming suburbs, remote villages, or crowded cities.

After 2,000 years, the gospel continues to be "the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Romans 1:16). We should trust God's providence and go wherever he leads us—even to unfamiliar and uncomfortable places. Our job is to plant and water gospel seeds and leave the results to him.

Personal Challenge:

Do you know any missionaries or church planters who are serving in parts of the world where living conditions are difficult and resistance to the gospel is strong? Pray for them and write them a note of encouragement.

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DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Did you follow up on “doing good and helping” in one of the areas mentioned at the conclusion of last week’s set of Discovery Questions? What did you do? (Consider how you can continue this service to others on a regular basis.)
2. When was the last time that you gathered with a group that included relatives and/or close friends? What memories do you have of that occasion?

Ask two people to read aloud **Acts 10:17-24, 34-48**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

3. Acts 10:24 says that Cornelius was expecting Peter’s arrival and had contacted his relatives and close friends.
 - What do you think the mood or atmosphere was like in Cornelius’s house as they awaited Peter’s arrival?
 - What might the group have talked about?
4. Have you ever been in a situation where someone showed favoritism and you were the person ignored/overlooked/rejected/ridiculed as a result? What was your initial reaction?
 - Have you ever witnessed the above scenario happening to someone else? What was your reaction? Do you wish you had reacted differently? How?
5. What influences in today’s culture can cause us to “show favoritism” or treat certain people differently?
6. How should the fact that God does not show favoritism impact the way I view my relationship with him? The way I pray? The way I treat others (in the workplace, at school, in my neighborhood, in daily contacts)?
7. What do you learn about Jesus from Peter’s words to Cornelius and those gathered with him?
8. Peter spoke of the “good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:36). How would you define or explain the peace that Jesus brings?
9. The circumcised believers were “astonished” when they saw the Holy Spirit being poured out on Gentiles (Acts 10:45). Have you ever been “astonished” at something God did or provided for you? Describe what happened.
10. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: “I will . . .”
11. Ask yourself, “In what areas of my life do I tend to show favoritism or treat people in a way that does not honor God? Is there a specific individual whom I have not treated with proper respect or dignity?” Create a plan for addressing this during the upcoming week.

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Acts 13:1-13, 26-31, 38-39**. You can also read next week’s supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Find how God is calling
you to take the gospel
beyond your locality.**

STUDY: Acts, Part 2

THEME: The Church Goes Global

LESSON TEXT: Acts 13:1-13, 26-31, 38-39

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 96; Isaiah 6:1-8; Acts 1:8; 13:14-25, 32-37, 40-52; 14:1-28

FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

BY MARK SCOTT

In the animated movie *Toy Story*, Buzz Lightyear's famous catchphrase was, "To infinity and beyond!" One could use that same line upon coming to Acts 13. The chapter continues the geographical expansion of the church outlined by Jesus in his commission to the apostles, with the goal of reaching "the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Acts 13–20 contain the missionary journeys and the church-planting efforts of "Team Paul." The first journey is recorded in Acts 13–14. Barnabas and Saul (and those who assisted them, such as John Mark) traveled more than 1,200 miles in perhaps two to three years and planted several churches. Not bad for the ancient world. Acts 13 is rich with gospel content and missionary principles.

A Divine Calling

Acts 13:1-3

Following the death of Herod Agrippa I, the gospel spread effectively and multiplied fruitfully (Acts 12:23-24). Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem to the missionary-enterprising church in Antioch of Syria where they had spent time earlier (Acts 11:19-30). Armed with resources of people and funds, the Great Commission church in Antioch would lay evangelistic claim to the Roman world.

The church in Antioch included *prophets* (inspired speakers) and *teachers* (those who gave formal instruction). Five of them are mentioned by name. The list of five is quite diverse, for it includes at least one African, a Levite, a Jewish man who was a Roman citizen, and one brought up with royalty. God would set apart two-fifths of the leadership of this church for the mission field.

The divine call to the mission field came in the context of worship and the spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer. "The Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" We do not know if this was an audible voice (which would be the most natural way of understanding the text), or was spoken through one of the prophets, or was some kind of inner impulse. But the Holy Spirit was a missionary Spirit, calling Barnabas and Saul to leave Antioch and travel to places yet unreached with the gospel.

A Large Obstacle

Acts 13:4-13

The road forward made perfect geographical sense. Most likely Barnabas and Saul left Antioch and boated down the Orontes River to the port at Seleucia on the Mediterranean Sea. From there they sailed to the island of Cyprus and worked their way from one end of the island to the other (from Salamis to Paphos). Since Barnabas was from Cyprus (Acts 4:36), he may have influenced where they went first.

They *proclaimed the word of God* (i.e., preached the gospel) in the Jewish synagogues (a typical starting point for Paul in his church planting). John Mark was their *helper* (or servant).

But whenever and wherever the gospel is preached, one can be sure Satan will rear his ugly head and try to nip the growth of the church in the bud. The primary obstacle in the city of Paphos was a Jewish *sorcerer* named Bar-Jesus—later referred to as Elymas—who is identified as a *false prophet* (that's a lot not to like—see Deuteronomy 18:9-14, 22—plus his name mocked Jesus' name). This man attended to the *proconsul* (who may have been the governor of Cyprus), Sergius Paulus. (It is interesting that the changing of Saul's name to Paul is mentioned in connection with the conversion of Sergius Paulus.)

Elymas did everything in his power to turn the intelligent leader of the island away from Christianity. Saul, now identified as Paul, confronted the sorcerer. Paul exposed Elymas for who he really was (*child of the devil, enemy of everything right, one full of deceit and trickery, and one who had perverted the right ways of God*). Through Paul, God's hand was against Elymas. A mist came over him that caused him to go blind. (Is history repeating itself, for Paul also was blinded [Acts 9:9]?) Having witnessed such a clear demonstration of the Lord's power, the proconsul believed. The missionary team then sailed from the island to what is now southern Turkey, where they commenced their treacherous climb to the cities of southern Galatia.

A Road Sermon

Acts 13:26-31, 38-39

Upon coming to Antioch of Pisidia, Paul followed his established strategy of going to the Jewish synagogue first. At the right time in the liturgy, Paul was asked to deliver the exhortation. He launched into what could easily be called his road sermon. Luke shares much of what Paul said because most likely this was Paul's go-to sermon upon entering synagogues. It offered a bird's-eye view of the Bible and mirrored Stephen's speech in Acts 7.

Paul traced Israelite history and brought it down to its fulfillment in the saving message of Jesus. The message was that Jesus came, people did not recognize him as God's Son, he was condemned, crucified, buried, and then God raised him from the dead. This saving event was witnessed by many people. Therefore, the *forgiveness of sins* is now offered to everyone. Justification, not possible through the law of Moses, is now provided. The gospel was being boldly proclaimed by those whom the Spirit had commissioned.

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WHY DO THEY GO?

BY DAVID FAUST

Why would anyone voluntarily leave their native culture and move to a different land? Why would anyone choose to give up the conveniences of home and adjust to unfamiliar languages, climates, customs, and foods—and raise their own financial support to pay for these inconveniences?

What Paul Might Have Said

The apostle Paul's missionary work required sleepless nights and exhausting days. Along with the ordinary stresses of ministry, he often was hungry, thirsty, and cold. His adversaries hated him. They beat him with rods, pelted him with stones, and locked him in prison. It would be traumatic to go through even one shipwreck, but that happened to Paul not once but three times; and it must have been terrifying when he "spent a night and a day in the open sea" (2 Corinthians 11:25).

But if you asked Paul, "Why did you go on all those missionary journeys?" I imagine he might have said something like this: "I went because everyone everywhere needs to hear that Jesus the Messiah died for their sins and rose from the dead. Faith comes by hearing the Word. How can they hear if no one tells them? The Father's grace saved me, Christ's love compelled me, and the Holy Spirit sent me. After all the Lord has done for me, how could I do anything less than spread the gospel every chance I get?"

Paul's letter to the Philippians, written from prison, is filled with joy and peace. His confident assertion, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation" (Philippians 4:12), shows he had no regrets.

We all can't travel the world as Paul did, but making disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them is every Christian's mission.

What Missionaries Say

Several years ago, I asked some of my missionary friends what motivated them to serve the Lord cross-culturally.

A church planter in New Zealand said he was motivated by "the simple fact that God asked me to do it." He added, "What gets me through the difficult times is an obligation of obedience to a Savior who once felt the same way."

Missionaries living in Africa told me, "Christ's passionate love for his lost sheep compels us to go and serve."

A young couple in Europe explained what it's like to minister amid "post-Enlightenment apathy, enormous influxes of non-Western religions, and a divided evangelical population of at best 3 percent." Why did they go? "To bring faith in Christ to a place filled with despair where the bride of Christ has been wounded by cynicism and unbelief."

Missionaries in India described their nation as "a complex mosaic of cultures, religions, and peoples" where "everyone seems to be looking for something—anything—to satisfy their deepest needs." Their dream "is to see Indian Christians and churches look more like what we find in the pages of the New Testament—single-minded, sacrificial, and sold-out to Jesus and his agenda."

The Bible speaks of faithful servants like these when it says, "Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth" (3 John 6-8). If we agree with "why they go," we should help them keep going.

Personal Challenge:

Send a care package to a missionary you know. Include a note of appreciation for their work, along with special foods or other treats they can enjoy.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you assess and address any issues of favoritism in your relationships with others over the past week? (Make this a matter of personal prayer, and if keeping a journal of both your progress and your struggles helps, do that.)

Ask two people to read aloud **Acts 13:1-13, 26-31, 38-39**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

2. Suppose you were helping your church to select, send out, and support a missionary. What are five character qualities you would most want to see in your recruit?
3. Fasting is mentioned as part of the process by which the church in Antioch worshiped, then sent out Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:2-3).
 - Have you ever participated in a fast?
 - What would you say are the spiritual benefits of fasting?
4. John (also called Mark in the New Testament) is described in Acts 13:5 as a “helper” to Barnabas and Saul. What kinds of “help” do you think John may have provided?
5. Sergius Paulus, the official in Paphos to whom Barnabas and Saul spoke the word of God, is described as an intelligent man (Acts 13:7). Eventually he became a believer (v. 12). Do you think it is harder for intelligent or highly educated people to accept the Christian message? Explain your answer.
6. Elymas the sorcerer tried to turn Sergius Paulus from the faith (Acts 13:8).
 - What influences in contemporary culture do you see as especially powerful in turning people from the Christian faith?
7. Sergius Paulus was “amazed at the teaching about the Lord.” What portions of the Bible do you find especially “amazing,” and why?
8. Acts 13:13 says that at one point in the missionary journey, “John left [Barnabas and Saul] to return to Jerusalem.”
 - Why do you think John made the decision to return to Jerusalem?
 - What kind of spiritual help might John have needed when he returned?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: “I will . . .”
10. Note the “Personal Challenge” that David Faust included with his essay that accompanies this lesson.
 - What are some other steps you can take to become more familiar with missions, both locally and worldwide?
 - Why is such familiarity important for all Christians to possess?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Acts 19:8-10, 23-41**. You can also read next week’s supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Pray that “whole provinces,” states, and countries will hear the “Word of the Lord.”**

STUDY: Acts, Part 2

THEME: The Church Goes Global

LESSON TEXT: Acts 19:8-10, 23-41

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Acts 18:18–19:7, 11-22; 20:17-38

EPHESUS

BY MARK SCOTT

Some cities are so significant that just saying their names gets a reader's or hearer's attention. Some examples include Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, London, New York, Mexico City, Tokyo, Moscow, Calcutta, and Beijing. In the ancient world the same was true with Ephesus, a city with a population that rivaled Rome and Thessalonica. It boasted a library equal to the ones in Ur and Alexandria. And Ephesus was home to the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven great wonders of the ancient world. Some of the greatest ancient ruins are evident there today.

Paul visited Ephesus toward the end of his second missionary journey as he made his way back to Jerusalem and then to the church in Antioch of Syria. He promised he would return to Ephesus if the Lord willed (Acts 18:21-22). Paul kept his promise and returned there toward the beginning of his third missionary journey.

Instead of traveling by boat, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. He found some disciples, but he also found some deficient theology. They had heard of Jesus but knew only the baptism of John. Paul instructed them about the connection between belief, baptism, and the Holy Spirit. Upon receiving the Holy Spirit, they spoke in tongues (the third Pentecost of sorts—cf. Acts 2:1-4; 10:44-48). This was more a matter of incomplete doctrine than false doctrine, a situation similar to what Priscilla and Aquila encountered with Apollos (Acts 18:24-26).

Establishing Beachheads

Acts 19:8-10

The apostle to the Gentiles typically went to the Jewish synagogue when he entered a city, if one were present. Paul used the synagogue as a beachhead for the gospel. What we know as the Old Testament was already being studied there, and Paul knew he could easily enter the conversation there. When he got to the synagogue in Ephesus, he *spoke boldly* (or *freely*) for three months. Paul did apologetic evangelism (literally, *dialogued* with those present) concerning the *kingdom of God*. (The word *kingdom* does not occur often in Acts, but when it does, usually a geographic or ethnic expanse of the gospel is taking place.)

The Jews living in this pagan Roman city did not appreciate Paul's message, so they became *obstinate*, refused to believe, and publicly *maligned* the Way. Early believers were sometimes called "followers of the Way." (The phrase occurs twice in our lesson text and probably stems from John 14:6.)

But this rejection by the Ephesians did not dissuade Paul from establishing another beachhead for the gospel. He knew how crucial Ephesus was for reaching the whole province of Asia, a part of what was known as Asia Minor (or Turkey on a modern map). So, Paul took the disciples and held discussions in the *lecture hall of Tyrannus* during the

day when it was not being used. This campus ministry of sorts lasted for two years. This beachhead helped all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the region to hear the gospel.

Encountering Challenges

Acts 19:23-41

Establishing beachheads for the gospel was no walk in the park. The Jews in Ephesus first opposed Paul. Then Paul encountered the spirit world through the incident with the seven sons of Sceva (Acts 19:13-16). Finally, the patrons of Artemis caused a riot in the city. A Catholic priest once said, "Wherever Paul went there was riot or revival. Wherever I go they serve tea."

While Paul did not rob temples or speak against Artemis (v. 37), he did offer the unbelievers an alternative to every other belief system. When the people embraced the Way and thus renounced idol worship, the idol makers became furious.

Demetrius (vv. 24, 38) led the rebellion. He was a *silversmith* who made little idols of Artemis for profit. Demetrius claimed to be concerned for the reputation of Artemis, but it is clear he really was motivated by greed. Besides being a silversmith, he must have been a compelling speaker for he stirred up the crowd. Luke uses the words *disturbance*, *uproar*, and *confusion* to describe the scene.

The riot moved into the main *theater* of the city (a beautiful structure that held 25,000 people). Various people were put forward, some to stir up the crowd and others to quiet the crowd. Paul's traveling companions (Gaius and Aristarchus) were used as pawns. Paul himself wanted to speak to the crowd, but *officials of the province of Asia*, described as friends of Paul, believed it too risky for him to do so.

For two hours the Ephesians yelled how great Artemis was (compare this with 1 Timothy 3:16 to find out how great Christianity is). Alexander the Jew was also put forward, but he could not quiet the crowd.

Finally, the *city clerk* gave the crowd an appropriate sanity check. The clerk was very careful not to commend Paul, but he reminded the people of their responsibilities under Roman authority and successfully dismissed the *assembly* (the Greek word used is the normal word translated "church").

The gospel needs beachheads to expand, but those beachheads may create challenges.

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WHAT I LEARNED IN AN ANCIENT THEATER

BY DAVID FAUST

Visiting Ephesus was a highlight of my recent visit to Turkey (now spelled Türkiye). In New Testament times, Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. At the height of its glory, the city had a population of about 250,000 and a seaport accessible to large ships. Today the site is a sprawling, fascinating collection of stone artifacts, but no one lives there anymore.

Spiritual Challenges and Open Doors

First-century Ephesus was a complicated place to plant a church. It was filled with idolatry, sexual immorality, and crime. Yet, God opened “a great door for effective work” there (1 Corinthians 16:8-9), so the apostle Paul spent more than two years in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10; 20:31), conducting daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. The gospel spread rapidly and “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10). The seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3 may have been planted by missionaries trained in Ephesus who returned to preach in their hometowns.

Paul urged his young protégé, Timothy, “Stay there in Ephesus” (1 Timothy 1:3). Priscilla and Aquila lived in Ephesus for a while, too, and helped the eloquent speaker Apollos to know the Lord more adequately (Acts 18:24-26). Tradition says the apostle John wrote his Gospel and Epistles in Ephesus before dying there.

The city’s temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis was larger than a football field—425 feet long and 220 feet wide, with a roof supported by 127 tall stone pillars. Today, only the foundation and one stone column remain. (I noticed a stork had built a nest on top of the one remaining pillar.) First-century silversmiths made hefty profits by selling statues of Artemis, and they worried that the Christian faith would have a negative impact on their business. An angry mob dragged some of Paul’s companions into the theater and shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” for about two hours (Acts 19:28-34). The massive semicircular stone theater where that happened, which seated 25,000 people in

biblical times, has been thoroughly excavated and restored.

A Lost Priority

Our tour group spent several hours exploring the archaeological remains of Ephesus, but one site held special fascination for me. I scrambled to the top of the theater and sat by myself for a while in the highest row available. It was precarious to climb those weathered stone steps, but it was worth the trouble. Sitting there alone, I pictured the theater filled with boisterous, rioting crowds, and I thanked God for the historical reality of the Bible.

But a troubling thought crossed my mind. The Ephesian Christians had a lot going for them. Paul lived and served there for a while. So did Priscilla and Aquila, Timothy, John, and other noteworthy leaders. Paul personally encouraged and prayed for the church’s elders (Acts 20:17-38), and he penned a letter that closed with these words of blessing: “Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love” (Ephesians 6:24). Yet, a few decades later, the Lord warned the Ephesian church, “You have forsaken the love you had at first” (Revelation 2:4). Eventually the church’s “lampstand” was removed (v. 5), and the Ephesian church faded into the annals of history.

Many churches today are blessed with good teaching, skillful leaders, and comfortable buildings. But before I left my seat in that ancient theater, I prayed, “Lord, never let us lose our first love for you.”

Personal Challenge:

On a piece of paper or in your personal journal, write a list of reasons you love the Lord. Say a prayer of praise and tell him why you love him. Ask the Lord to keep your love for him strong and vibrant for as long as you live.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Following up on last week's "Personal Challenge" projects: What steps can you take to continue your involvement in and support of missions and missionaries? How can you involve others (family and church friends) in this effort?
2. In what subject or subjects do you think you would be best suited for leading a discussion group of, say, 10 to 15 people?

Ask two people to read aloud **Acts 19:8-10, 23-41**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

3. Some in Ephesus "publicly maligned" the Christian faith (Acts 19:9). In what ways do we see the faith maligned today (publicly or otherwise)?
4. While in Ephesus, Paul was able to have daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9). Do you think the discussion format would be effective in today's culture as a means of communicating the Christian faith? Why or why not?
5. Silver images of the goddess Artemis were worshipped in Ephesus. What items or ideas could be considered "idols" in Western society today?
6. Mark Scott notes the part that greed played in the thinking of Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen in Ephesus.
 - In what ways does greed manifest itself in contemporary culture?
 - What can we do to avoid being impacted by greed?
7. Two of Paul's traveling companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, were seized during the uproar in Ephesus (Acts 19:29).
 - What personality or character type was well-suited for traveling with someone like Paul?
 - What risks would be involved in traveling with Paul (besides what happened to Gaius and Aristarchus)?
8. Acts 19:31 notes that some of the officials of the province of Asia were friends of Paul and were concerned for his safety.
 - What does this tell us about Paul's strategy in taking the gospel to new locations?
 - What would be some examples of similar friendships that Christian leaders might want to develop in today's setting?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. As a follow-up to last week's lesson and Personal Challenge, commit to praying each day this week for one (or more) of the following: a missionary your church supports, a missionary whom you know (but whom your church does not support), and/or a missions-related organization. Pray for two points noted in today's Scripture: boldness (Acts 19:8) and protection from opposition (Acts 19:35-41).

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Acts 28:17-31**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Pray that the gospel continues to go forward “unhindered.”**

STUDY: Acts, Part 2

THEME: The Church Goes Global

LESSON TEXT: Acts 28:11-31

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Acts 27:1–28:10; Romans 1:8-17

STUDY

ROME

BY MARK SCOTT

There is a romance with the city of Rome. From the current Vatican, Saint Peter's Square, artifacts, and cathedrals to the ancient Colosseum, Titus's arch, Paul's prison, and the ancient city built on seven hills, Rome draws people to herself. This city of almost 3 million people today attracts millions of visitors each year. It also attracted the apostle Paul. He longed to go there (Romans 1:11).

Luke was very interested in telling the story of the gospel going to Rome. He recorded Jesus telling the apostles that the good news would go to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Even on the Day of Pentecost there were visitors from Rome present (2:10). God promised Paul he would one day get there (23:11), and Paul leveraged his citizenship to ensure it (25:11-12). Paul even made his way to Rome via an all-expenses-paid trip (courtesy of the Roman government) by way of a wild ship ride (Acts 27). The shipwreck and survival at Malta delayed the arrival in Rome, but not one soul on the ship was lost; and Paul made it to Rome safely.

Anticlimactic Arrival

Acts 28:11-16

After winter ended, Paul was put on a ship that was traveling from Alexandria, Egypt, to Rome (with a stopover at Malta). The ship's "hood ornament" (or "ornaments") were the twin gods of *Castor and Pollux* (twin sons of Zeus, according to Greek mythology). The route took them to Syracuse (on the eastern edge of Sicily) and then up the western coast of Italy passing Rhegium (on the southernmost tip of Italy) and stopping at Puteoli. Paul was under guard but was given some freedom to spend time with fellow Christians along the way.

Then Luke simply stated, "And so we came to Rome." This is the climax of the book? Perhaps this was as far as Luke could take the story. Did he intend a third volume? Or perhaps Luke was making a theological point. Despite the persistent efforts of Paul's enemies to stifle his impact and silence his voice, God's sovereign purpose for Paul was being fulfilled. His ministry would continue, and the gospel would make further progress, as we will see. In Rome, Paul was grateful to see more believers and felt *encouraged*, even while under a Roman house arrest situation.

Surprising Reception

Acts 28:17-22

Paul followed his typical missionary strategy and met with the Jewish leaders first. He shared his testimony with them by stating that he had been above reproach in his dealings with his people. He had not violated their customs, nor had

he committed any crime deserving death. The Jewish leaders had handed him over to the Romans, who basically forgot about him until he appealed to Caesar. Paul believed in the *hope of Israel* and that was why he was chained.

Strangely enough, the Jews in Rome seemed clueless about both Paul and his message. They had heard about what they called this new sect (most of what they heard had been negative), but they had not received any word about Paul. Did the charges against Paul slip through the cracks? Both sides probably sensed some angst, which set up the meeting to follow.

Unhindered Preaching

Acts 28:23-31

A meeting was arranged, and a large crowd gathered to hear Paul. Five terms are used to describe Paul's preaching—*explaining, witnessed, persuade, proclaimed, and taught*. The message of the gospel is always verbal. Paul spoke with them from morning till evening. His content concerned the government of God (his *kingdom*), and his sources were drawn from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. But Paul didn't simply relate facts. He worked to persuade his audience about Jesus' identity.

As is usually the case when the gospel seed is spread, some responded positively and some responded negatively. They could not even agree among themselves about Paul's teaching. Paul decided to quote Isaiah 6:9-10. When Isaiah was called into prophetic service, God warned him that not all would really "hear" him. In both Isaiah's day and Paul's day, the Jewish heart was *calloused*. Even though God pleaded with them to repent, they refused. Isaiah's prophecy was being relived. Paul took this as a crucial turning point. Jewish rejection allowed for Gentile inclusion.

Similar to his two years in a Caesarean jail (Acts 24:27), Paul spent two more years under house arrest in Rome. He experienced just enough freedom to preach the reign of God and the identity of Jesus. He did so with all boldness and *without hindrance*.

Thus this great book of Acts ends with two words: *without hindrance*. It is also the story of how Acts continues: the church moves forward through the world without hindrance while quietly converting the hearts of people.

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UNHINDERED

BY DAVID FAUST

One of my favorite parts of the book of Acts is its last verse. Luke ends his account of the early church's history on an upbeat note. He summarizes the apostle Paul's ministry while under house arrest in Rome by exclaiming, "He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!" (Acts 28:31).

Facing the Obstacles

In the first century, many things hindered the spread of the gospel. Transportation was limited; having no cars, buses, planes, or trains made travel much more difficult. Technology and communication were limited. People had no computers, printers, phones, modern postal systems, or microphones to amplify their preaching. Yet, within 30 years of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the gospel was impacting the capital of the Roman empire as Paul, a former Pharisee, boldly taught the message he once violently opposed.

That final verse of Acts encourages me, but it also challenges me. I don't want my own flaws or pessimism to hinder God's work, but frankly, at times I feel discouraged by all the hindrances Christians face today. Secularism prevails. Churches are being marginalized, while immorality is normalized and celebrated. Biblical values are mocked and ignored. I need to remind myself that even though hindrances abounded in first-century Rome, somehow the gospel continued to advance.

Seeing God at Work

When I ministered in Baldwin, New York, in the 1970s and '80s, our young congregation faced many obstacles. Our little handful of believers worshipped together in a rented facility. We found an empty building the Episcopal Church had closed because of what they called a "lack of interest in the community." The building looked a bit run-down, but we decided to buy the property if we could.

I put on a suit and tie and drove to the headquarters of the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island to meet with their officials.

"How much do you want for the building and the parsonage next to it?" I asked.

"\$170,000," they answered. (That was quite a reasonable price, even in 1979.)

I swallowed hard and made a counteroffer. "Would you take \$85,000?"

To my surprise they said yes, but now I didn't know what to do because we didn't have \$85,000! Somehow, by God's grace the funding came together. We purchased the property and began holding worship services there on Sundays. The building needed a lot of work. After spending mornings in the church's office, I would change my clothes and spend my afternoons outside with a paintbrush and a bucket of paint, sprucing up the building and meeting curious passersby. My wife, Candy, and I served with that church for 10 years, through tough times and exhilarating times, before leaving in 1988 so I could join the faculty of Cincinnati Bible College & Seminary.

Fast-forward 35 years. On a sunny Sunday morning this past May, we visited that congregation, now known as One Life Christian Church. A friendly woman greeted us at the front door and asked, "Is this your first time here?" Tears filled my eyes as the building filled up with people (mostly African American and Latino) singing God's praises and sharing in Communion. The property is now debt-free and most of the church's leaders are bi-vocational, which keeps costs down.

Even when times are hard and things look grim, nothing can stop the gospel of Christ. Let's never allow our lack of faith to hinder God's work.

Personal Challenge:

What is hindering your relationship with God right now? Ask the Lord to remove it or help you to keep serving him in spite of it.

Optional Challenge: How have you seen God at work in your life this year? Thank the Lord for what he has provided and ask him to help you see his hand at work, even when difficulties and hindrances abound.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Evaluate the prayer challenge that was part of the previous week's questions.
 - Can the prayers for boldness and for protection from opposition be applied to you, your family, or your church? If so, how?
- Ask two people to read aloud **Acts 28:11-31**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.
2. What city, town, or community holds a special fascination for you? Why?
 3. Mark Scott mentions how Paul longed to go to Rome (Romans 1:11). Why do you think Paul possessed such an interest in Rome?
 4. Our lesson text tells how Paul was "encouraged" by Christians whom he met at Rome (Acts 28:15).
 - How have you been encouraged over the past week by people whom God has brought into your life?
 - How were you an encouragement to someone?
 5. Paul said that he was chained as he was "because of the hope of Israel" (Acts 28:20).
 - How do you think Paul's hope in Christ impacted how he viewed being chained in Rome?
 - What is the difference between Christian hope and the way the world tends to define hope?
 6. The Jewish leaders whom Paul met in Rome used the word "sect" to describe followers of Jesus (Acts 28:22).
 - What would the term "sect" imply about followers of Jesus?
 - What negative or derogatory terms are sometimes used of followers of Jesus in today's culture?
 7. Note the very different reactions of those who listened to Paul's daylong teaching session (Acts 28:24-25). Why would Paul's teaching have caused such a contrast in responses?
 8. What is your favorite ending to a movie or TV program you have seen or to a book you have read?
 - What might this ending say about Luke's purpose for writing the book?
 9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
 10. List what you consider the most important lessons you have learned from the study of Acts during the past two months. How will you personalize these lessons in order to enhance your walk with the Lord?

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.