

WITNESSES

A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

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STUDY 1

ACTS 11:19–30

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. –Acts 11:20

OVERVIEW

As we enter back into the story, we pick up at a pivotal spot in Luke's retelling of the Acts of Jesus, by his Spirit and through his church. In chapter 11, we see the beginnings of a worldwide mission to bring people from every race and culture to faith in Christ.

This passage is a brief summary of the formation, strengthening, and sending of the church in Antioch, but its brevity shouldn't be mistaken for lack of significance. In Luke's relatively short account of God's work in this church, he is setting the stage for a paradigm shift in understanding who the church is. The passage begins as persecution has scattered Jewish followers of Jesus to cities north of Jerusalem. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire and very multicultural at the time. As the believers arrive, some begin to share the gospel with Greeks who come to faith in Jesus in large numbers.

As the church in Jerusalem hears what is happening, they send Barnabas to go and check on the genuineness of these new converts. On his arrival, Barnabas sees first-hand what the grace of God has been doing and encourages these believers to press on in the face of persecution. Seeing the great need there, Barnabas gets Saul (the Apostle Paul), and the two of them spend a year teaching this new church. During that time, a prophet comes down from Jerusalem who predicts a severe famine will spread over the Roman Empire. On hearing this, the new church in Antioch pools together what money they can and give it to Saul and Barnabas to take with them to Jerusalem.

In the book of Acts, Luke is writing to show how Jesus uses his church to continue his mission to save lost people. Yet what we are seeing here is that *who* those people whom Jesus came to save are is about to radically change. Starting in chapter 10, Luke begins building up confidence in Theophilus and the early church that the gospel now truly knows no borders, favors no one race, and centers around no one culture. It is good news for *all* people. And now, in the church at Antioch, we are seeing the heart of God for the nations begin to beat not just through one man but a whole church. Through them we will encounter something world changing, both then and today.

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A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

PASSAGE DISCUSSION

Let's get talking...

Are you someone who tends to be inviting or skeptical of new, novel ideas?

Read Acts 11:19-30

Questions:

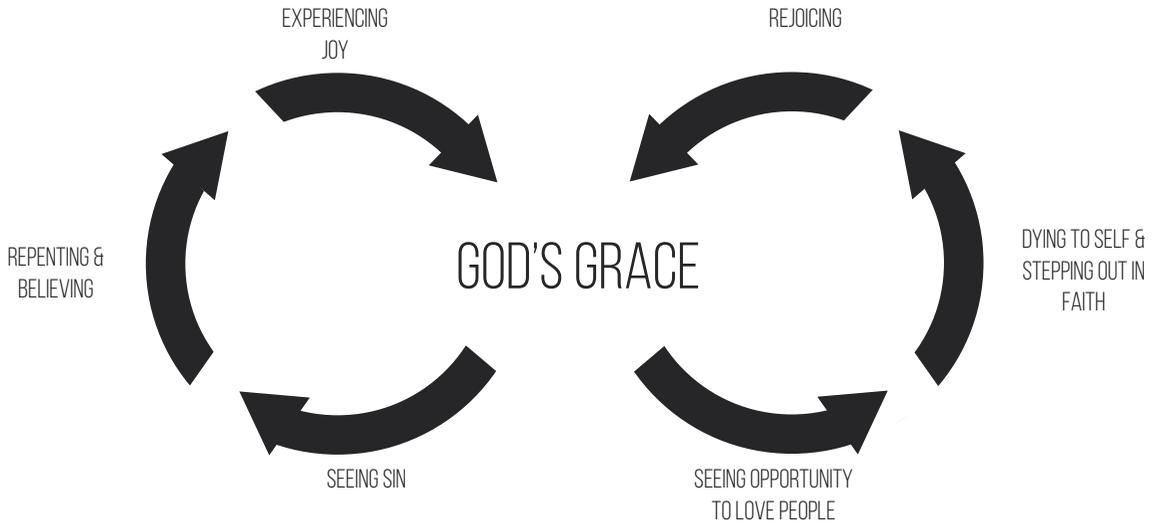
1. Read over the history of this young, soon-to-be-influential church in Antioch. Describe certain stages of its growth that you can see in this passage.
2. What happened in chapter 10 and the first half of chapter 11? What connection do you think Luke is making for his readers between what happened through Peter and what's happening through the church at Antioch?
3. Why do you think here at Antioch is the first time Christians are called "Christians?" (Hint: What, or who, is new about the church in Antioch?)
4. Why does the human heart become tribal and inward-focused as opposed to inclusive and outward-focused?
5. In this passage, we see internal growth (vv. 22, 23) resulting in external growth (v. 24b). Look at the diagram on the next page; how have you seen God's grace working inwardly affect how you live outwardly?

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INWARD MOVEMENT
OF THE HEART

OUTWARD MOVEMENT OF
LOVE FOR GOD & OTHERS



TAKEN FROM "THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE"

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STUDY 2

ACTS 14:8-23

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, "Men, why are you doing these things?" –Acts 14:14-15a

OVERVIEW

In Acts 14, we experience another first for the people of God as Paul and Barnabas travel overseas and begin to share the gospel with people who have no Jewish background. This sets the stage for the Apostle Paul's first near-death experience, and Jesus uses him to bring many people to faith.

In chapters 13 and 14 of Acts, Luke documents Paul's first missionary journey. Through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the church in Antioch commissions and sends Paul and Barnabas to uncharted territories. Last week, we saw the church expand northward into modern day Syria; now Paul and Barnabas will travel across the Mediterranean Sea to modern day Cyprus and Turkey with the message of salvation through Jesus. In chapter 14 in particular, Paul has a very interesting encounter, a first of its kind in the New Testament. In the city of Lystra, he gets to share the gospel message with truly "pre-Christian" people who have no Jewish background or understanding of the Old Testament...the scene is definitely not what they expected.

Starting in verse 8, Paul and Barnabas heal a crippled man. The crowd watching can't believe what they've just seen. *These men must be gods walking among us!* they think. The crowd, stunned by what they've just witnessed, try offering sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas, yet the two immediately refuse. Paul then begins to explain what the healing ultimately points to in the work of God, but even that can't keep the crowd from trying to worship the Apostle and Barnabas. In the midst of the scene, some Jews come and stone Paul. Yet the Apostle is not deterred. The next day, he begins a 60-mile journey to Derbe where many people come to faith through his preaching. As their missionary journey closes, Paul and Barnabas head back to Iconium and spend some time encouraging the churches there.

Though the scene in chapter 14 is a little crazy, the people to whom Paul is sent can't be overlooked. Remember, Luke is writing the book of Acts to Theophilus and the early churches to give them confidence in what they've heard about Christ. Could Jesus really be that gracious? Could the gospel really be for anyone and everyone? Well, just look at the people of Lystra. There is nothing neat, clean, or presentable about them. They are unruly, uneducated, and definitely undeserving. And yet the Holy Spirit sends the Apostle and Barnabas to them to share the message of God's grace. It's these moments of God at work in Paul's first missionary journey that will spark the conversation we will explore next week.

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PASSAGE DISCUSSION

Let's get talking...

How would you describe American Thanksgiving to someone in rural India?

Read Acts 14:8-23

Questions:

1. Based on their response to the healing, what can we learn about the crowd in this passage?
2. Author Os Guinness says that effective communication of the gospel should be "message-centered and receiver-oriented," meaning that while the truth of the gospel remains the same, the way we present it adapts to the person we are talking to. Read and compare a sample of Paul's talks in Acts 13:26-41 and 14:14-17. How does Paul take the same message of the gospel and communicate it differently to the two different groups of people?
3. Read the description below of Brian. After seeing how Paul tailored his presentation of the gospel specifically to the people he was talking with, as a group discuss how you could communicate the gospel to Brian.

Brian is a friend you've recently made at the design company you work for. He never finished college but was always a really hard worker. After starting with an entry level position on the sales floor, he was able to work his way up to managing the department. As you've gotten to know him, Brian has opened up to you that he recently went through a difficult divorce and is feeling very lonely. His mom was Jewish, but they never went to Synagogue and, other than an old roommate's wedding, he's never been to a Christian church. He would say he believes there is something driving the world, but he doesn't know what that is. Right now, he's just hoping to find something in his career to keep him distracted from the hurt of not being able to see his two daughters. The two of you are grabbing a drink after a late work meeting, and you've been praying for God to open a door to share the gospel with him...

4. If Luke is writing Acts to give Theophilus and the early church confidence in what they've already heard about Jesus Christ, how does this passage give them greater assurance? How does it give you greater confidence that the promises of God are being fulfilled in Jesus?

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STUDY 3

ACTS 15:1–29

“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

OVERVIEW

Soon after Paul and Barnabas returned from their first journey, conflict arose in Antioch. Unlike past circumstances, this opposition came from within the church. Jewish Christians from Judea were teaching circumcision as a requirement for salvation. Having just returned from seeing many Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit by faith alone, Paul and Barnabas entered into a “sharp dispute and debate” (15:2, NIV) with the teachers of this false gospel. Because the teaching could cause dangerous confusion, Paul, Barnabas, and some others were sent to Jerusalem to discuss the question with the apostles and elders.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, the travelers are welcomed by the apostles, elders, and the rest of the church, and the Jerusalem Council (or Conference) begins. First, we have Peter boldly declaring that both Jews and Gentiles receive salvation in the same manner: by faith, through the grace of the Lord Jesus. He reminds the listeners of what we read about in Acts 10. Years before, God revealed to him that there was no cultural requirement for inclusion in the kingdom of God; all who believe can receive the Holy Spirit. Next, enter Paul and Barnabas to testify to the now-silent crowd about “the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” (v. 12), which served to confirm and validate God’s word to them.

Finally, James gives his verdict. The circumcision party liked James, because James took Jewish law and tradition seriously. Martin Luther would later (wrongly) describe the Epistle of James as a “strawy epistle” due to its focus on good works. This is the James who is about to make a decisive declaration about whether Gentiles must follow Jewish law in order to be saved. James doesn’t hold back. He goes straight to the Old Testament by stating that God chose from the Gentiles “a people for his name,” which was language typically applied to the Israelites. Then, he quotes Amos to show that the inclusion of Gentiles is fulfillment of prophecy. For good measure, he even calls Peter by his Hebrew name. James is bringing home the fact that salvation for the Gentiles is not a new idea and not a threat to Jewish Christians; it was God’s plan of grace from the beginning.

There are no works required for salvation, though guidelines are given that will allow them to live at peace among their Jewish brothers and sisters, as one family—“a people for his name.”

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PASSAGE DISCUSSION

Let's get talking...

Share about a time when you thought you had gotten a great deal, only to later realize it wasn't as great as you imagined.

Read Acts 15:1-29

Questions:

1. Based on the words of the letter to the Gentiles in verses 23-29, what do you think the Gentiles were thinking and feeling after hearing teaching that their salvation may not yet be real?
2. Read Galatians 5:1-14. Why does Paul take this issue so seriously? In what ways does it disregard Christ's sacrifice?
3. The Judaizers' added requirement that the Gentiles must follow Jewish law in order to be saved may seem extreme, especially considering the physical component, but it's not uncommon to view non-Christians as people who need religion rather than as people who need Christ. What are some ways in which believers tend to add requirements to the gospel of grace?
4. Why do you think the apostles specifically included the requirements listed in Acts 15:29? How do these guidelines reflect Paul's exhortation in Galatians 5:13-14?
5. Have you created rules for yourself and/or others that are not from God? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you where you are not walking in the freedom of God's love and salvation.

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STUDY 4

ACTS 16:11–34

...And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. –Acts 16:26

OVERVIEW

On his second journey, this time with Silas and recently joined by Timothy, Paul found that his plans were not God's plans. The events that unfold in Macedonia lay the foundation for the church at Philippi, a church that would have a tremendous impact on the spread of the gospel in Europe and Asia, and the way in which Luke focuses the narrative tells us much about the way God works. He doesn't mention the number of converts (though numbers are mentioned at other times in Acts), and he doesn't zero in on the strategic decisions that would make this particular church plant successful. Instead, we're given three individuals.

We're first introduced to Lydia, whom Paul and the others met at a place of prayer near the river. Lydia was a wealthy woman, a seller of purple goods, and the fact that she was at the place of prayer suggests that she had come to believe in the one true God. But she would not yet have had opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus. After hearing from Paul, she proclaimed her faith by being baptized and opened her home to the travelers.

Next, we're told about a slave girl with a spirit of divination. Her owners were profiting off of her fortune-telling ability, which she demonstrated by yelling truth about Paul and the others, to Paul's great annoyance. By casting out the demon, Paul angered her owners, who then had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in prison under false charges.

But prison is exactly where God wanted them. Despite their pain and shackles, they prayed and sang, and the Spirit responded with an earthquake that shook the foundation, swung wide the doors, and unfastened the prisoners' bonds. It also gave them the opportunity to share the gospel with the jailer, who was ready to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. Instead, he and his entire family received the gift of salvation and spent the night rejoicing.

Did God divert Paul's plans to travel to Asia and Bithynia so that the church at Philippi could be established, and many souls could be saved? Yes. But he also sent Paul, Silas, and Timothy all the way to Macedonia specifically to answer the cry of Lydia's seeking heart, free a slave girl from demonic oppression, and bring everlasting joy to a jailer and his family.

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PASSAGE DISCUSSION

Let's get talking...

Share about a time when your plans were diverted.

Read Acts 16:11-34

Questions:

1. What do we know about Lydia, the slave girl, and the jailer? Based what we're told, what else can we infer about them?
2. The slave girl's owners wanted Christians to leave their city, because the believers threatened their livelihood. They also threatened to rid the city of a common source of supernatural guidance. What are some comparable things that make people in your community resistant to the gospel?
3. Read Philippians 1:1-6, which was written years later to the church that started in Acts 16. What is encouraging and hopeful about this passage?
4. Do you believe that God would send someone on a journey just to minister to you? Do you believe that he would send you on a journey just to minister to one specific person? How can seeing God's heart for individuals change how we think of God and others?
5. As a group, read Isaiah 61:1 and pray for the Holy Spirit to give you a deeper understanding of the good news, healing, and freedom Jesus brings to all who believe.

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STUDY 5

ACTS 17:16–34

“For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” –Acts 17:23

OVERVIEW

In Acts 17, we read what may be the peak of Paul’s evangelistic preaching in his speech on Mars Hill in Athens. Through this speech, Luke transitions to show how the gospel will now go head-to-head with the most powerful force in the world at that time: Rome.

During his second missionary journey, the Apostle Paul finds himself stranded in the center of intellectual and cultural thought after a tough run in Thessalonica. Athens was everything we think of it today and more. It was a stunning metropolis that housed beautiful art, cultural icons, and the leading thinkers in philosophical thought. Think of a city like Paris: rich, cultured, and breathtaking. Yet when the Apostle arrives, what he sees is a community of misguided worship. The city was submerged in idols, some of which the Athenians didn’t even know the names. Prompted by the sight he sees, Paul launches into a well-crafted presentation of the gospel that wins over some who want to hear more from him about these “strange things” he shares with them.

During his sermon at the Areopagus, Paul displays an incredible example of cultural insight. Referencing philosophers known to the Athenians and elements of the biblical storyline, Paul begins to confront the misguided worship he sees and present a better way to commune with the one true God of the Bible. After calling the crowd to repentance in light of the coming day of God’s judgment, Paul states the assurance he has of these matters in the resurrection of Christ. As the crowd hears this, some mock, but others are drawn to the message and want to hear more about the work of God in Jesus.

This passage comes at an interesting turning point in the book of Acts. So far, Luke has shown Theophilus and the early church he’s writing to that the gospel can’t be stopped by the religious leaders of the day, and now he’s going to show how the good news of salvation in Christ can’t be stopped even by the secular rulers of the day. What begins in here Acts 17 is a march through the end of the book straight to Rome where Paul will ultimately bring the gospel to the most powerful city in the world. The picture is vivid. If not even Rome can stop the love of God in Christ, then what can? ...Your sin? Try again. As Paul would later say, “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).

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PASSAGE DISCUSSION

Let's get talking...

Have you ever gone to a foreign country? Describe your experience when you first stepped off the plane.

Read Acts 17:16-34

Questions:

1. What did Paul see when he arrived at Athens, and how did it make him *feel*? How would you react to something similar today?
2. Break up into three smaller groups. Have one group study verses 18-23, the second verses 24-28, and the third verses 29-32. After a short period of time, come back together and have each group share what Paul was saying in his speech.
3. In chapter 15, the council in Jerusalem affirms that salvation is by grace alone through Jesus alone...yet Paul doesn't seem to mention Jesus a lot in his talk in the Areopagus. Why do you think that is?
4. Look at the chart below on the themes of modern secularism, which draws on elements of the Epicureanism and Stoicism Paul encounters in Acts 17. What in the Apostle's message speaks to our current cultural beliefs?
5. What elements of the modern secular narrative are you drawn to believe? As a group, explain how the gospel of salvation by grace offers a better way than the secular themes we're drawn to believe.

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MODERN SECULARISM

MEANING

There is little purpose in life outside of securing my own personal **happiness**.



IDENTITY

I determine who I am through expressing my inner **desires**.

HOPE

I can fix what's broken in my life through **self-discovery**.



GOODNESS

The best life is one lived with the most **authenticity** to my true inner self.

ASPIRATION

My goal in life is to reach a place of ultimate, self-sustainable **pleasure**.



SENSE

Christianity is merely one option among countless **contestable** worldviews and beliefs.

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STUDY 6 ACTS 19:23–41

When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater... –Acts 19:28-29a

OVERVIEW

On his third missionary journey, we see Paul visit some of the great cities of the 1st century. After visiting Athens, the *intellectual* capital of that time, he goes to Corinth, the *commercial* capital, and now he lands at Ephesus, the *religious* capital where, during a riot, we see the legitimacy of the gospel upheld by an unlikely person.

In chapter 19, Paul has been spending time in Ephesus, a great ancient city that was highly influential in its time. After resting there some, he decides to begin his return to Jerusalem through Macedonia. But before he can leave, a great riot sparks in Ephesus over the message of the gospel. A man named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of the goddess Artemis, made a public complaint that the message of salvation through Christ alone would severely hurt his business if people no longer worshiped Artemis. As he said this, the people present became enraged. Luke tells us that the whole city was thrown into confusion and rushed into the local theater to protest the gospel message that was threatening their highly lucrative businesses around the goddess Artemis. For context, the entire financial, social, and political system of Ephesus hinged on the worship of this goddess. The truth of the gospel message threatened not just their religious identity, but their social and financial livelihood.

After some time, a city clerk came in and quieted the crowd. Using simple logic, he began to reason with the angry mob. The fact that the gospel message contradicted worship of Artemis should not worry them, he stated. Since everyone knows that Ephesus has the great temple of Artemis, they will still keep coming. Furthermore, the disciples were not being sacrilegious or blasphemous to the goddess, and to continue on like they were in the theater risked the potential of being charged with rioting, "since there is no cause we can give to justify this commotion." After he said this, the city clerk sent the mob away.

This passage seems like an odd series of events that doesn't really add much to the story Luke is telling. Yet, when we remember who he is telling it to, it comes into frame. Luke is writing, in part, to Theophilus, a Roman official, to give him confidence in what he's heard about Jesus Christ and the gospel. And here in this scene at Ephesus we see, for the second time, a Roman official legitimize the gospel message by defending it in public. For Theophilus, and for us, to know that the plans of God cannot be stopped by an angry mob or by a Roman official gives us confidence in the fulfillment of God's promises in Christ.

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A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

PASSAGE DISCUSSION

Let's get talking...

In a tense moment, is your first reaction "fight" or "flight"?

Read Acts 19:23-41

Questions:

1. What caused the riot in the story? In our current cultural moment, what about the gospel might illicit similar responses of anger from people?
2. Do you think Paul was wise in listening to the advice to not enter the theater? Or, instead, do you think he missed an opportunity to share the gospel in an influential city?
3. Place yourself as a Christian in the midst of the mob in the story. How would you feel? Why?
4. It's rare for a narrative in the Bible to give extensive detail like Luke does in verses 35-41. How does the city clerk calm the crowd, and why would Luke go into such detail about it?
5. As the Bible explains, apart from Christ, the outward scene at the theater matches the inward reality of the hearts of non-Christians. Take a moment as a group and pray by name for non-Christians you know, that God's grace would break into their rebellious hearts.

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STUDY 7

ACTS 26:12–32

And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.” –Acts 26:28-29

OVERVIEW

In acts 26, we find Paul in Caesarea, where he has been held for two years while waiting to be heard by Caesar. After learning about Paul from Festus, Agrippa, the king, asked to hear from him as well. So Agrippa, Bernice, and their entourage in all their pomp and splendor went to listen to Paul’s story.

Verse 12 begins mid-testimony as Paul is once again telling of his conversion. The fact that Luke, for the third time, documents the details of Paul’s testimony speaks to its importance. He didn’t want Theophilus and the others in the early church to miss this.

The content of Paul’s testimony to Festus and Agrippa is also significant in the context of the moment. In sharing his story, he conveys that his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus allowed him to believe what he had always known—that there would be a Messiah, and there would be resurrection from the dead. Until his personal experience with Christ, he was blind to the truth that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy, despite his knowledge of the teachings of Moses and the prophets. He shared with Festus and Agrippa that his pride and anger toward those who believed in Jesus as the Christ was only causing harm to himself and keeping him from having peace. Belief in the resurrection wasn’t a threat to his Jewish beliefs, because it didn’t contradict Jewish teachings. In the same way, the Jewish people who accused Paul and were ready to assassinate him upon his release had no real argument against him.

Knowing nothing of the prophets’ teachings, Festus found Paul’s testimony absurd. But Paul’s personal story of coming to understand the truth of the gospel in relation to Judaism was meaningful to Agrippa, because Agrippa knew about the prophets. And although it was not a natural setting for a heart-to-heart conversation, Paul asked him directly if he believed. Employing a gracious non-answer, Agrippa responded with a question of his own: “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” To which Paul earnestly responded, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.”

Both Festus and Agrippa agreed that Paul had done nothing to deserve imprisonment, but they didn’t have the power to free him. Paul had appealed to Caesar, so it was time to go to Rome.

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OPTION 1: PASSAGE DISCUSSION

Let's get talking...

Whether it was one person or 1,000, what is the most intimidating audience you have ever spoken before?

Read Acts 26:12-32

Questions:

1. Share your testimony. This could be the story of when you first believed in Christ as your Savior or of a time when your faith in God became deeper and more real. If you aren't yet sure if you believe, write about what brought you to where you are now. In community group, take turns sharing your stories.
2. Pray for the Holy Spirit to use your story and the stories of those around you to bring many to faith in him. Ask him to remind you of times others have encouraged your faith.
3. As you go throughout your week, take time to thank someone who has been an encouragement in your walk with the Lord.

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STUDY 8

ACTS 27:13–38

...And he said, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you." –Acts 27:24

OVERVIEW

In Acts 23:11, the Lord told Paul that he would testify in Rome just as he had testified in Jerusalem. Now, two years later, Paul was on his way to Italy. Because of various obstacles and delays, the ship—carrying cargo, some prisoners, passengers (including Luke), and crew—was traveling at a dangerous time of the year. Paul already suggested staying at Fair Havens for the winter, as not to risk losing both the cargo and the lives of those on board, but Paul had no authority in the matter. Because Fair Havens was not deemed a suitable port, they continued on.

Shortly after setting sail, the ship was caught up in a northeaster, which tormented them for over two weeks. On the second day of the storm, they were already throwing cargo overboard; the journey seemed doomed. All this time, Paul had been confident that God's plan was for him to go to Rome. Now, when he was finally going to Rome, it looked as though he was about to die at sea. But, as David Gooding states in *True to the Faith*, "as far as God is concerned, mere mindless nature will never be allowed to overwhelm us until God has attained the goal he had in mind when he gave us our tasks."

Although God did not calm the storm or perform any observable miracles, he encouraged Paul by sending an angel to speak to him in a dream. The angel assured Paul that he would testify before Caesar and that no lives would be lost as the ship rocked its way to shore. With added confidence, Paul encouraged the men with the words he had been given. He also urged them to eat, because they had work to do.

Sometimes God commands the winds to be still, and other times he lets the storms rage, but his presence doesn't change, and he is still faithful. As Paul had previously written to the churches in Rome, "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose," and "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Romans 8:28, 35, 37).

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OPTION 1: PASSAGE DISCUSSION

Let's get talking...

Do you love being out on the water, or would you rather keep your feet on dry land? Share about a memorable boating experience.

Read Acts 5:1-11

Questions:

1. What emotions do you think Paul was experiencing as he embarked on this journey that would take him to Rome to testify before Caesar?
2. Read Romans 8:26-39. How can these words help us during the storms life brings our way?
3. What specific information did the angel give Paul? Considering that nothing changed about the circumstances of those on the ship, why was the word from the angel helpful?
4. Do you think we ever miss a message from God because we're busy waiting for an obvious miracle? How can we become better spiritual listeners?
5. How can believing that God's plans for us will not be thwarted help us when we become fearful or anxious?

OPTION 2: GUIDED GROUP PRAYER

After reviewing the story from Acts 27:13-38, read Romans 8:26-39 aloud.

1. Spend time thanking God for the specific promises in this passage.

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2. If anyone in the group is currently in the middle of a storm, spend time praying over them. Petition God to reveal the truth of Romans 8 in their lives during this time.
3. Spend time praising God together and asking for the Holy Spirit's help in believing that God is faithful and his promises are true.
4. If, during the group prayer, the Holy Spirit gave you an encouraging word or scripture for another person in the group, share it with them before you leave.

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STUDY 9 ACTS 28:17-31

"Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."
-Acts 28:28

OVERVIEW

As the book of Acts closes, we see the lead Apostle in the second half of the book, Paul, imprisoned as he awaits his trial in Rome. At first glance, it seems like Jesus' missional project of the 1st century church has failed. Yet despite the chains, the Roman Empire would not be able to stop the advance of the gospel to all peoples.

In Acts 28, Paul finally arrives in Rome where he will spend the next two years under house arrest as he awaits a trial before Nero, the Roman Emperor. As he arrives to Rome, the center of the world at that time, Paul wastes no time in calling together the Jewish leaders to share the gospel with them. This was Paul's general pattern wherever he went. First, he'd go to the Jews and try to persuade them of the gospel. After limited success, he would turn to the Gentiles and evangelize them. Here, at the end of Acts, we see the same pattern with added theological insight. Paul goes first to the Jewish leaders but has some mixed results. Some believe, but Luke tells us that others aren't convinced. Paul's final words prove to be the most divisive. Quoting Isaiah 6, Paul tells the Jewish leaders that since they won't listen, the salvation of the gospel has been sent to the Gentiles now. And, unlike the Jewish leaders, they will listen. After this scene, Paul stays in Rome for two years under house arrest preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.

As the book of Acts closes, it's important to step back and look where we've come. Remember, Luke was writing this book to Theophilus, a Roman ruler, and the 1st century churches this would circulate to, in order to give them confidence in what they've already heard about Jesus. As the book starts, Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. As the book closes, we see the immediate fulfillment of that as we long for more. While in one sense Rome was the *center* of the world at that time, a gospel presence there would propel that church to the *ends* of the world. Paul knew this. Though he never could have suspected that he would finally reach Rome as a prisoner. Yet what better way to show the power of God's grace? As a prisoner of the greatest Empire in the world, Paul has a power even Nero couldn't thwart: the unstoppable, one-way love of God in Christ. A grace so strong that Nero, Satan, and death itself can't hold it back.

WITNESSES

A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

PASSAGE DISCUSSION

Let's get talking...

What's your favorite ending to a story? Did things resolve? Was anything left open to the imagination?

Read Acts 5:17-42

Questions:

1. Read Acts 1:8. What do we know about the city of Rome, and why is it significant that the book of Acts ends there?
2. Read Acts 1:1-3, 6-8 and 28:30-31. As a group, can you put the theme of the book of Acts into one sentence?
3. Read the quote below. How does the open-ended finish to the book of Acts challenge you to be more missional in your life?

"In Jesus, the reign of God entered human history in a way not previously experienced...The dynamic action of the kingdom of God in the words and deeds of Jesus and the mission of his disciples changed lives, values and priorities, and presented a radical challenge to the fallen structures of power in society. To say 'Jesus is Lord', and not Caesar or any of his successors, is a major missional mandate in itself. Luke can find no more missional way to end his second volume than by leaving Paul in Rome where he '*proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance.*'"

—Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God's People*

4. What's a specific barrier you experience to joining God's mission to renew nature, culture, and lives through the gospel (e.g. fear of man, priority of time, apathy toward neighbors)? What about the character and actions of Jesus motivates you to turn from that sin and toward living a more missional lifestyle?
5. What has been your biggest takeaway from the book of Acts? How have you seen God's grace in it?