

Commentary

Explore the Bible®

Winter 2017-18 > Danny Akin, General Editor

Acts 13-28

LifeWay | Adults

LIFE BY DESIGN

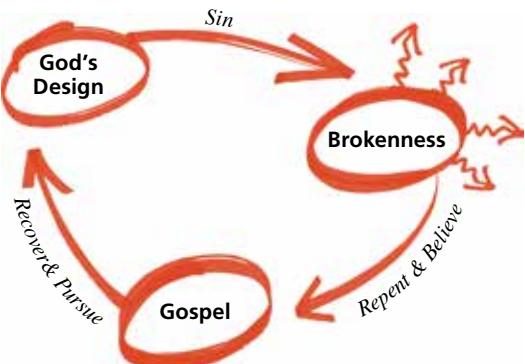
We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make **LIFE** work.

The Bible tells us that God originally planned a world that worked perfectly—where everything and everyone fit together in harmony. God made each of us with a purpose—to worship Him and walk with Him. (See Genesis 1:31 and Psalm 19:1.)

Life doesn't work when we ignore God and His original design for our lives. We selfishly insist on doing things our own way. The Bible calls this sin. Sin leads to a place of brokenness. The consequence of our sin is separation from God—in this life and for all of eternity. (See Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23.)

At this point we need a remedy—some good news. Because of His love, God did not leave us in our brokenness. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to us and lived perfectly according to God's Design. Jesus came to rescue us—to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our sin and shame to the cross, paying the penalty of our sin by His death. Jesus was then raised from the dead—to provide the only way for us to be rescued and restored to a relationship with God. (See John 3:16, Colossians 2:14, and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.)

We don't have the power to escape this brokenness on our own. We need to be rescued. We must ask God to forgive us—turning from sin to trust in Jesus. This is what it means to repent and believe. Believing, we receive new life through Jesus. God turns our lives in a new direction. (See Mark 1:15, Ephesians 2:8-9, and Romans 10:9.)



When God restores our relationship to Him, we begin to discover meaning and purpose in a broken world. Now we can pursue God's Design in all areas of our lives. God's Spirit empowers us to recover His Design and assures us of His presence in this life and for all of eternity. (See Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10.)

Now that you have heard this Good News, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to Him using words like these: My life is broken—I recognize it's because of my sin. I believe Christ came to live, die, and was raised from the dead—to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, and I will follow Him.

Excerpted from *Life on Mission: A Simple Way to Share the Gospel*.

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*Evangelistic emphasis

**Sanctity of human life emphasis

» MEET THE WRITER

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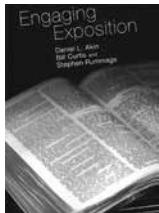
A WORD FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR



In Acts 1:8, Jesus told His disciples that when the Holy Spirit came upon them—which He did in Acts 2—they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Acts 13–28 is the record of the gospel’s advance to the ends of the earth. What began in Jerusalem (chap. 1) made its way to Rome (chap. 28). What started with the focus on Peter (chaps. 1–12) concluded with the focus on Paul (chaps. 13–28). The Holy Spirit directed every step. The Lord Jesus was exalted at every turn. The gospel went forth in unstoppable power.

Acts is the history book of the New Testament. It provides vital information about the early church. We learn so many lessons as we travel through its twenty-eight chapters. First, God is sovereign, and His plan to reach the nations with the gospel will succeed. Second, the work of the Holy Spirit is essential to the advance of God’s mission. Third, God calls ordinary people to do extraordinary works that reveal His greatness and glory. Fourth, the gospel is a compelling message that demands a response. Fifth, the work of getting the gospel of the kingdom to the end of the earth is not finished. The mission of Acts will only be finished when the One who ascended in chapter one returns. Our role in God’s story is clear: live in the power of the Spirit, bear witness to Christ, and watch what God does through the obedience of His people!

Danny Akin



Danny Akin is president and professor of preaching and theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Dr. Akin has authored numerous books, including Engaging Exposition.

INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

The Book of Acts forms a historical bridge between the Four Gospels—the accounts of what Jesus did and said—and the rest of the New Testament, much of which consists of Spirit-inspired letters, or epistles, that reveal the struggles and victories of local groups of believers. Acts provides an account of how the Holy Spirit indwelled, guided, and empowered Christ's early followers to turn their world upside down. Persecution, a miraculous escape from prison, a blinding light at midday, an earthquake, a shipwreck, and various other adventures punctuated the church's history as early believers set about their mission of proclaiming the gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth. As we study the Book of Acts, may we too be stirred by the Holy Spirit to take up boldly the banner of the Great Commission.

» WRITER

Strictly speaking, the Book of Acts is anonymous. That is, its human author is not identified in the text. However, we can safely assume the book's original audience knew the writer's identity. Moreover, we as Bible students can arrive at some reasonable conclusions about the writer's identity from clues within the Book of Acts and also from the Gospel of Luke.

Let's look first at the introductory verses in Luke and Acts. In Luke 1:1-4, the writer of that Gospel addressed it to someone called "Theophilus" [thee AHF ih luhs], a name meaning "lover or friend of God." This name may have referred to an individual—perhaps the writer's patron—or collectively to the readers as a group who loved God. Luke introduced his Gospel as a carefully researched account of events surrounding Jesus Christ that he learned from "original eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (Luke 1:2). The Book of Acts was likewise addressed to Theophilus and referred to the writer's "first narrative . . . about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). This direct connection between the introductions of Luke and Acts along with the two works' similar vocabularies, writing styles, and emphases all strongly indicate the same writer penned both books.

Second, although the writer did not identify himself as one of the original eyewitnesses of Jesus' life and teachings, we find four places in Acts where the writer included himself among those traveling with the apostle Paul (see Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; and 27:1-28:16). Therefore, the writer of Acts was not one of the original disciples but was a companion of Paul and an eyewitness of key events in Paul's ministry.

Third, the Greek vocabulary and style found in both Luke and Acts suggest that the writer was an educated person who was proficient in the use of the

Greek language. He also had the skills of a historian. The writer knew how to research, compile data, and write an orderly chronology of events.

The consensus among Christians from the early Christian centuries forward has been that Luke, a physician and missionary companion of Paul, wrote both the Third Gospel and the Book of Acts. Luke is mentioned by name three times in Paul's Letters (see Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). Possibly, he was a God-fearer—that is, a Gentile with a close association to Judaism—before he was converted and became a follower of Christ.

» DATE

Scholars suggest different dates of writing for the Book of Acts depending on how they interpret its ending. Luke ended the book by noting that the apostle Paul spent “two whole years in his own rented house” (Acts 28:30). Paul had arrived in Rome as a prisoner who had appealed to stand in judgment before Caesar (25:10-12). Roman law permitted Paul to live under a form of house arrest (see 28:16,30). There was a soldier assigned to guard him at all times, yet Paul was also able to receive visitors in the home. Luke was one of those who at times visited Paul in Rome (2 Tim. 4:11).

That Luke ended the Book of Acts without mentioning the outcome of Paul's trial before Caesar may indicate the verdict had not yet been rendered. In other words, Acts may have been written prior to Paul's death but during his imprisonment in Rome. This view posits that Luke completed Acts sometime around AD 62.

A second option is that Acts ends as it does because Luke had reached the conclusion of his narrative and had therefore accomplished his purpose in writing. The Gospel of Luke had described “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (see Acts 1:1). Acts recounted all the things that the early church continued to do and teach as the Holy Spirit empowered believers to carry the gospel to the ends of the world (Acts 1:8). Thus, Acts ends with Paul having arrived in Rome, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with full boldness and without hindrance” (28:31). Bible scholars who accept the second option propose a date of writing for Acts sometime between AD 80–90. Still other conservative scholars favor a date sometime around AD 70, when the Roman army destroyed the temple in Jerusalem.

» OVERVIEW

The Book of Acts overlaps slightly with the Gospel of Luke, with each book describing Jesus' marching orders to His followers, His ascension into heaven, and the disciples' return to Jerusalem to wait for the promised Holy Spirit

(Luke 24:46–53; Acts 1:4–12). The Book of Acts as a whole can be divided into two parts: Acts 1–12 and Acts 13–28. The events in the first part of the book primarily feature leaders of the church in Jerusalem (Peter, John, Stephen, Philip), while the second half of the book focuses primarily on the apostle Paul and his missionary coworkers.

These two larger divisions can be further organized into smaller parts. The first half of Acts focuses on the Jerusalem church in chapters 1–5 and then on the mission of the church in Judea and Samaria in chapters 6–12. The second half of the book deals first with Paul’s three missionary journeys in chapters 13–20 and then with Paul’s arrest, defense, and journey to Rome in chapters 21–28. However, these divisions need not be viewed as rigid. The church had already spread as far as Damascus by chapter 9; moreover, Paul’s missionary journeys were interrupted by a return trip to Jerusalem (chap. 15).

The two major divisions of Acts end with events that can be dated with some certainty. Herod Agrippa I died in AD 44 (12:21–23), and Felix, the Roman governor of Judea, was replaced by Festus in approximately AD 60 (24:27). Festus was the governor who sent Paul to Rome to appear before the emperor (25:12). Thus Paul’s two years in Rome probably should be dated between AD 60–62. The events recorded in Acts thus took place over approximately three decades following Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension.

» PURPOSE

Luke dedicated both Acts and the Gospel of Luke to Theophilus [thee AHF ih luhs (*th* as in thin)] (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Whether the designation Theophilus, meaning “friend of God,” was a specific individual or a way of referring to all Christians, Luke obviously intended his two volumes to be read widely. He wanted Christians to be grounded in the certainty of their faith. Luke achieved that goal by giving an account of what Jesus had done and taught prior to His ascension (Gospel of Luke) and what He continued to do through His Spirit in the early church (Book of Acts).

» THEMES

In Acts, Luke demonstrated how God guided the early church in sharing the gospel first with the Jews and then with the Gentiles. The inclusive nature of the gospel—freely offered to everyone—crops up repeatedly throughout Acts until finally Paul, in Rome, preached Jesus “without hindrance” (Acts 28:31). Other major themes include the role and power of the Holy Spirit, the importance of evangelizing, and the role of prayer. These themes create a portrait of a church experiencing unity and welcoming all who responded in faith to the good news of Jesus.

OUTLINE OF ACTS

I. Empowerment for the Church (1:1–2:47)

- A. Waiting for power (1:1-26)
- B. The source of power (2:1-13)
- C. Pentecostal witness to the dispersion (2:14-47)

II. Early Days of the Church (3:1–12:25)

- A. In Jerusalem (3:1–7:60)
- B. In Samaria: the Samaritan Pentecost (8:1-25)
- C. To the ends of the earth: Philip's witness (8:26-40)
- D. Conversion and preparation of Paul (9:1-31)
- E. In Judea: Peter in Caesarea (9:32–11:18)
- F. To the ends of the earth (11:19–12:25)

III. Paul's First Missionary Journey (13:1–14:28)

- A. Cyprus (13:1-12)
- B. Pisidian Antioch (13:13-52)
- C. Iconium (14:1-7)
- D. Lystra, Derbe; return to Antioch (14:8-28)

IV. The Jerusalem Council (15:1-35)

V. Paul's Second Missionary Journey (15:36–18:22)

- A. Antioch to Troas (15:36–16:10)
- B. Troas to Athens (16:11–17:34)
- C. Corinth (18:1-22)

VI. Paul's Third Missionary Journey (18:23–21:16)

- A. The Ephesian Pentecost (18:23–19:41)
- B. Macedonia to Troas, Athens, Corinth, and return (20:1–21:16)

VII. Paul en Route to and in Rome (21:17–28:31)

- A. In Jerusalem (21:17–23:35)
- B. In Caesarea (24:1–26:32)
- C. Voyage to Rome (27:1–28:15)
- D. Ministry at Rome (28:16-31)

"Outline of Acts" is taken from the HCSB Study Bible © 2010 B&H Publishing Group, page 1858.
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THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

Christ's death and resurrection are central to the gospel message.

Soon after I graduated from the seminary in New Orleans, our family moved to South Korea so that I could teach in a seminary there. We moved from a small town in rural south-central Louisiana to a sprawling city of more than ten million people.

During the long, tedious flight over the ocean, my wife and I did our best to keep our three small children occupied and content. We had been traveling for more than twenty-four hours when our plane finally began its descent toward the airport in Seoul, South Korea. My four-year-old son was wide awake with his face glued to the window. He watched for thirty minutes as city lights streamed by beneath the plane. I could see the continuous flow of lights from my seat too, and I thought to myself, "Just how big is this city?"

When our plane finally touched down on the runway, my son leaned back in his seat and said in a matter of fact way, "This place is not so different from where we came." I was taken aback by his words. Had he been looking at what I saw outside the window? Did my four-year-old perceive something that I did not—or could not—see? Or was he just exhausted from the trip?

For the next few weeks our family confronted a whirlwind of things that were quite different from where we came: the language, the food, and so many different customs. Still, though, my son's comment kept echoing in my thoughts. God used it to remind me of something that I needed to recall. In one vital way my four-year-old son had been more perceptive than I. Whether in south-central Louisiana or South Korea, people need the Lord. Whatever our language, diet, or customs, we are all the same in that we are sinners who need to hear and respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In this session, we will explore how Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the church in Antioch to share the gospel with people who were different from them in many ways. But in every place these missionaries preached, people were transformed by the one unchanging gospel of Jesus Christ.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ACTS 13:1-52

Chapter 13 marks a major turning point in the Book of Acts. Chapters 1–12 had focused on the church’s explosive launch in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost and its aftermath. The Holy Spirit came upon the fledgling group of believers in a powerful way, Simon Peter proclaimed the gospel, and three thousand people were baptized. As that number continued to grow, Jewish authorities in Jerusalem became more hostile toward the early church. They arrested Peter and John. They stoned Stephen, but not before this courageous believer had delivered an unforgettable testimony about Jesus. Later, Philip began taking the gospel outside of Jerusalem to people in Judea and Samaria.

Saul of Tarsus (later known as Paul) made several appearances in the first half of Acts—first as an antagonist of Christians (8:1–3), next as a convert to faith in Christ (9:1–19), then as a fellow proclaimers of the gospel in Damascus and Jerusalem (9:20–30), and finally as a compassionate ministry coworker with Barnabas (11:25,30; 12:25). In Acts 13, however, Paul and his missionary associates took center stage from that point to the end of the book, carrying the transformational message of Christ throughout the Roman Empire—and eventually to the imperial city of Rome.

Acts 13:1–3 well might be called the inauguration of the church’s intentional missionary movement. These verses describe an event prompted by prayer, guided by the Holy Spirit, and marked by the setting apart of two missionaries for their God-given work. This inaugural event led to the first missionary journey (13:4–14:28). Paul, Barnabas, and a cousin of Barnabas’s named John (also known as John Mark; see 15:37) left Antioch and traveled by boat to the island of Cyprus, where the region’s proconsul became a believer (13:4–12).

From Cyprus the team sailed north to the south-central coast of present-day Turkey. They arrived in the city of Perga. John Mark left the group at this point and returned to Jerusalem (13:13). His departure later resulted in a temporary rift between Paul and Barnabas (15:37–40).

Next the missionaries traveled to Antioch of Pisidia, some one hundred miles north of Perga, where Paul was invited to address the synagogue on the Sabbath Day. He used this opportunity to proclaim the gospel message and to call listeners to repentance and faith in Jesus (13:14–41). He was invited to speak again on the next Sabbath, but the Jews became jealous of his popularity and began to contradict and insult Paul. Both Paul and Barnabas saw this opposition as an indication they were to move out of the synagogue and proclaim God’s message directly to the Gentiles. In contrast to the Jews’ resistance to the gospel, many Gentiles in this region believed (13:42–52).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

CRUCIFIED (Acts 13:26-29)

The synagogue was the hub of Jewish community life in places outside Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas's missionary strategy was to go first to the synagogue if a city had one. Antioch of Pisidia did have a synagogue. Possibly there was a prearranged invitation for one or both men to deliver a message regarding the day's Scripture readings (13:15). Paul addressed the hearers and used key historical events spanning from the exodus to the kingship of David to introduce Jesus as Israel's promised Savior (13:16-25).

VERSE 26

“Brothers and sisters, children of Abraham’s race, and those among you who fear God, it is to us that the word of this salvation has been sent.

Paul was aware that his synagogue audience consisted primarily of Jews (**children of Abraham’s race**) but also some God-fearing Gentiles (**you who fear God**) who had identified with Judaism and its promises to (and through) Israel. This latter group first appeared in the narrative of Acts in the story of Cornelius of Caesarea, a devout, God-fearing centurion (10:1-3). However, Paul made his case for the gospel initially to his Jewish listeners.

By using the phrase *children of Abraham’s race* (“children of the stock of Abraham,” KJV; “sons of the family of Abraham,” ESV; “fellow children of Abraham,” NIV), Paul reminded his Jewish hearers of their common descent from Abraham and their common devotion to the covenant of promise the Lord God had established with Abraham. Paul had briefly sketched the history of the Lord’s saving actions at the start of his sermon (13:16-25). These actions pointed unmistakably to Jesus’ coming as the Savior. Paul declared that Jesus was indeed **the word of this salvation** that God had sent to His people. In the remainder of his sermon, Paul would unpack exactly how that message impacted those gathered that day to hear him.

VERSE 27

Since the residents of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize him or the sayings of the prophets that are read every Sabbath, they have fulfilled their words by condemning him.

In an implied warning to his hearers, Paul pointed out the tragic irony of Jesus’ condemnation at the hands of those who should have been the first

to believe in Jesus. The **residents of Jerusalem and their rulers** lived in the city of David—the very heart of Jewish life and faith. The people of that city went about their daily business in the awesome shadow of the Lord's temple. There portions of the Old Testament's prophetic writings were **read every Sabbath**, including passages that foretold the Messiah's coming, what His mission would be, and the mistreatment He would face. Yet instead of taking stock from the Scriptures, the Jews of Jerusalem and their leaders had **fulfilled** the prophets' words when they refused to **recognize** Jesus ("knew him not," KJV). Instead they rejected and condemned Him.

VERSE 28

Though they found no grounds for the death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him killed.

In the final two verses in this section, Paul concisely summarized the events of Jesus' death and burial. In the first half of this verse Paul reminded his hearers of Jesus' innocence. The statement **they found no grounds for the death sentence** ("no cause of death in him," KJV; "no guilt worthy of death," ESV) is a prominent theme in all four of the Gospels. Matthew's Gospel and Mark's Gospel report the difficulty that the Jerusalem rulers had in finding witnesses to agree on a charge against Jesus (Matt. 26:59-61; Mark 14:56-59). Both Luke's Gospel and John's Gospel reveal that Roman officials rebuffed the Jewish rulers' unjust charges against Jesus several times before finally giving in to political threats (Luke 23:4-5,14-15; John 18:38; 19:4,6). In spite of the lack of evidence against Jesus, the Jewish religious leaders succeeded in compelling **Pilate**, who wielded the authority of the Roman Empire in Jerusalem, to have Jesus crucified.

VERSE 29

When they had carried out all that had been written about him, they took him down from the tree and put him in a tomb.

Paul reminded his hearers of the connection between the events that happened to Jesus and the fulfillment of Scripture. The events surrounding Jesus' arrest, trials, and crucifixion might have shocked and disheartened the disciples, but God wasn't taken by surprise by them. He had revealed the things that would happen to Jesus ahead of time through the Old Testament prophets. The Jewish religious leaders, however, refused to see and learn from the truth that the prophets had written about Christ in the Scriptures. Thus, the Jewish leaders became unwitting partners in fulfilling what the prophets had written. Paul did not specify the specific Scriptures he was referring to in this verse; perhaps he had in mind a passage such as Isaiah 53.

Following Jesus' death on the cross, His body had been removed **from the tree** and placed **in a tomb** ("in a sepulchre," KJV). The Greek term rendered *tree* can refer to a number of items made of wood, including wooden clubs (Mark 14:43), stocks (Acts 16:24), or an upright pole (or tree) on which a horizontal cross beam could be hung for crucifixion. More significantly, Paul's use of this term likely was meant to remind his Jewish listeners of Deuteronomy 21:22-23: "If anyone is found guilty of an offense deserving the death penalty and is executed, and you hang his body on a tree, you are not to leave his corpse on the tree overnight but are to bury him that day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse." Paul made this connection explicit in Galatians 3:13, where he quoted from Deuteronomy 21:23 to emphasize that Christ redeemed believers from the law's curse by becoming a curse for them.

The words **they took him down** raise a historical question about who removed Jesus' body from the cross and buried Him. In Acts 13:27-28, Paul used the pronoun *they* several times in references to "the residents of Jerusalem and their rulers." That same antecedent seems to carry over into verse 29, implying that the citizens and rulers carried out these actions. However, the Gospels are more specific on this point, agreeing that one particular Jewish ruler, Joseph of Arimathea, carried out the removal and burial of Jesus' body (Matt. 27:57-60; Mark 15:43-46; Luke 23:50-53; John 19:38-42). Further, the Gospels of Matthew and John point out that Joseph had become a disciple of Jesus, and John's Gospel reveals that Joseph was assisted by Nicodemus, another Jewish ruler who had shown great openness to Jesus (see John 3:1-2; 7:50-52).

It is important to keep in mind that in his message at the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, Paul was stating the key gospel events in a summary fashion to make a larger point that those ("children of Abraham's race," Acts 13:26) who should have been the first to recognize and believe in the Messiah were, in fact, the ones responsible for killing Him—just as the Old Testament prophets had prophesied. Paul was referring generally to the whole process, not the individual aspects of it. Yet he was issuing a subtle warning to his Jewish listeners in the Antioch synagogue not to commit the same sin.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Cross, Crucifixion" on pages 368–371 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does Jesus' crucifixion personally mean to you? In what sense could it be said that our sins were placed on Jesus as He died on the cross?

RESURRECTED (Acts 13:30-37)

In these verses, Paul emphasized the genuine good news of God's salvation plan. Jesus' death on the cross signified not a defeat but complete victory over sin. It was not merely an unjust death of an innocent life but rather the glorious awakening of the gift of eternal life. God brought about these two life-changing realities by raising Jesus from the dead.

VERSE 30

But God raised him from the dead,

This section of verses begins with the affirmation that **God raised** Jesus **from the dead**. This declaration was part of the apostles' earliest testimony about Jesus following His death on the cross. Less than two months after the crucifixion, the Holy Spirit came mightily upon the followers of Christ gathered in Jerusalem. Peter declared in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost that "God raised [Jesus] up, ending the pains of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by death" (Acts 2:24). In his first letter to the believers in Corinth, Paul summarized the gospel message he had received from the apostles. This message included the truth that Jesus "was raised [from death] on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:4). By this miraculous act, God had transformed the sorrow of miscarried justice into an everlasting triumph over sin and death.

VERSE 31

and he appeared for many days to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.

In Jesus' final address to His disciples before His ascension, He stated that they would be His witnesses even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Part of the disciples' task as witnesses would be to testify about the reality of Jesus' resurrection. Indeed, hundreds of Jesus' earliest followers were eyewitnesses of this reality. That is, they met with the risen Christ during the forty days of Jesus' resurrection appearances (Acts 1:3; 1 Cor. 15:6). Some had conversations with Him. Some ate a meal with Him. Some even touched His resurrected body. All of these early Christians wanted everyone to understand that, contrary to any natural expectation, the same Jesus who died on the cross had been raised from the dead.

Interestingly, as Paul continued to summarize the basic events of the gospel story in his sermon at the Antioch synagogue, he did not mention his own experience with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-6).

He would do so later in contexts where he defended his authority as an apostle (1 Cor. 15:8-11). In the context of the Antioch synagogue, however, it was more important for Paul to tie the gospel message to those who had traveled with Jesus **from Galilee to Jerusalem**—those who had first been designated by Jesus as **his witnesses**.

VERSE 32

And we ourselves proclaim to you the good news of the promise that was made to our ancestors.

Paul made two points in this verse. First, he and Barnabas were in line with the witnesses who walked with Jesus and saw Him crucified and then raised. Because the testimony to Jesus' resurrection was based on credible witnesses, those in the synagogue listening that day could trust what these missionaries were telling them. Just as those followers of Jesus who traveled with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem were witnesses, now Paul and Barnabas were proclaiming **the good news of the promise**.

Second, the content of the gospel message was in line with the covenant God had established with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and later with the Israelites through Moses, and still later with King David (**our ancestors**). The most far-reaching promises God made to His people, Israel, in the old covenant had been fulfilled ultimately in the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

VERSE 33

God has fulfilled this for us, their children, by raising up Jesus, as it is written in the second Psalm: You are my Son; today I have become your Father.

The word **this** refers to the promise mentioned in the previous verse. Paul again reminded his hearers of the significance of Jesus' resurrection. The resurrection was the foundational reality on which Jewish believers in particular could know for sure that in Christ, God had **fulfilled** the ancient covenant promises to Israel.

As evidence for this conclusion, Paul offered the first of several references to the Messiah from Old Testament texts. The first reference is a quotation from Psalm 2:7. Originally, Psalm 2 may have been used in coronation ceremonies for Israelite kings. It describes the close relationship between the Lord and His chosen king for His people. The psalm, especially verse 7, was widely understood as reflecting the promise God gave to King David to establish an everlasting kingdom through him (2 Sam. 7:13-14; 1 Chron. 17:12-14). At his coronation the king became, as it were, God's son and heir.

By New Testament times, Christian leaders such as Paul could see that Psalm 2:7 held an even deeper, far-reaching meaning. It pointed to an ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the eternal **Son** of the heavenly **Father**. Two suggestions have been made as to what Paul might have specifically referred in applying Psalm 2:7 to Jesus. One suggestion is that Paul had in mind the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism that announced Jesus' divine sonship (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). That same heavenly declaration was heard again at Jesus' transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35).

A second, more likely, suggestion is that Paul used Psalm 2:7 to underscore the significance of Jesus' resurrection. The thrust of Acts 13:33 is similar to what Paul said in Romans 1:4 when he wrote that Jesus "was appointed to be the powerful Son of God according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead." (1:4). Human kings of Israel entered into a new, intimate relationship with God at their enthronement. Jesus, on the other hand, was the Son of God from eternity; He did not become God's Son at some point in history. Rather, God's raising Jesus from the dead powerfully demonstrated that Jesus was, is, and always will be the Son of God.

VERSE 34

As to his raising him from the dead, never to return to decay, he has spoken in this way, I will give you the holy and sure promises of David.

Paul further explained the results of Jesus' resurrection. The risen Christ would never **return to decay** ("return to corruption," KJV, ESV; "be subject to decay," NIV). Jesus' resurrection was not merely a resuscitation to mortal life; it was the total conquest of death. Death itself was nullified and defeated. Jesus had foretold this death of death at the occasion of His friend Lazarus's being raised from the dead. He assured Lazarus's sister, Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26).

In his synagogue sermon, Paul pointed out also that long before Jesus' day, the prophet Isaiah had prophesied that God would one day fulfill His promises about an everlasting kingdom. The words **holy and sure promises of David** likely allude to Isaiah 55:3, a messianic text that in turn points to 2 Samuel 7:16. Speaking centuries after King David had died and centuries before Jesus lived, the prophet Isaiah declared God's promise to restore His people and give them a Ruler from David's line who would establish an everlasting kingdom. This divine promise was guaranteed by Jesus' resurrection—Jesus was established as the King of kings, the risen Lord who holds "the keys of death and Hades" (Rev. 1:18).

VERSE 35

Therefore he also says in another passage, You will not let your Holy One see decay.

Paul added still more Scripture support to his discussion of Jesus' resurrection by quoting from Psalm 16:10. Simon Peter had referred to this same verse twice in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:27,31). Both Peter and Paul used the quotation to make the same point: the covenant blessing promised to David could only be given by the Messiah who was alive forever, the **Holy One** whose glorified body would never **see decay**.

VERSES 36-37

For David, after serving God's purpose in his own generation, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and decayed, but the one God raised up did not decay.

In the remaining two verses of this section, Paul explained the link between his three Old Testament references. All Jews would agree that King David was a heroic figure in Israel's history, a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). David had effectively served **God's purpose** ("by the will of God," KJV) during his time. Yet David died, **was buried**, and his physical body **decayed** just as the bodies of all human beings before and after David return to the dust from which they are made (Gen. 3:19). That reality was radically changed, however, in the resurrection of Jesus. God **raised up** Jesus from the dead; thus, He **did not decay**. Paul reminded his hearers that God had fulfilled His promises to His people in Jesus Christ and that believers were beneficiaries of those promises.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Resurrection of Jesus the Christ" on pages 1349–1350 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*.

How significant is the resurrection to Christian faith? How would you explain to someone what Jesus' resurrection means to you?

PROCLAIMED (Acts 13:38-39)

Paul ended his sermon at the synagogue in Antioch with a proclamation of forgiveness in Christ and a sobering call to faith in Him. Paul warned his hearers not to react as past Israelites who refused to see what God was doing.

VERSE 38

Therefore, let it be known to you, brothers and sisters, that through this man forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you.

Paul proclaimed that because of God's actions through Jesus, **forgiveness of sins** was now available to those who believe. Paul did not specifically mention repentance here, although he had referred to repentance as having been central to John the Baptist's preaching (13:24). Paul's primary point was that forgiveness was available only through Jesus (**through this man**).

VERSE 39

Everyone who believes is justified through him from everything that you could not be justified from through the law of Moses.

The second point Paul proclaimed was that justification is made effective in all who believe in Jesus Christ. The Greek phrase translated **through him** ("by him," KJV, ESV) can be understood in either of two possible ways. On one hand, the Greek preposition can express a place or sphere in which an action occurs. Thus, the believer receives justification by virtue of being in a faith-relationship with Christ. On the other hand, the preposition can express the cause or means of an action—that is, the believer is made right with God *through*, or by means of, Christ. In reality, both understandings make the same point: in Christ believers are declared right with God.

The word rendered **justified** can be used in a relational sense, describing one who meets the standards or obligations of a relationship. However, in the New Testament the word is often used in a legal sense. It describes the legal status, or position, of a believer in relation to a holy and just God. Paul declared that no one is justified by works of the law (**through the law of Moses**) but only through faith in Jesus (see also Gal. 2:16).

Our society's tendency today often is directed toward building bridges between various religions. While we need open lines of conversation with people who hold other beliefs, such openness must never be at the expense of the truth that salvation is available only through faith in Jesus.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Justification" on pages 948–950 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Then read Romans 3:21-26. How can these verses in Romans help you understand and explain Acts 13:38-39?

MISGUIDED WORSHIP

Only God is worthy of worship and praise.

Augustine of Hippo was a church leader (bishop), theologian, and Christian philosopher who lived from 354 to 430 AD. His writings have had an enormous impact on the development of western Christianity, which in turn has shaped the trajectory of western civilization to this day. In his autobiographical book *Confessions*, Augustine began by commenting on why human beings worship God. His oft-quoted line from the opening paragraph explains that God created us for Himself. “Our heart is restless,” Augustine wrote, “until it repose in Thee.”¹

Augustine went on to acknowledge the tragic outcome of sin on our worship. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden, human beings have been tempted to worship everything but the One who alone is worthy of worship. As Paul wrote in Romans 1:25, sinful people “exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served what has been created instead of the Creator.”

Too often our worship is misguided. In futile efforts to quiet our restless hearts, we turn to substitute gods—idols. We trust in the power of money, fame, or position. Or we idolize human heroes, people who seem to embody our most strived-for qualities or achievements.

During their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas experienced this tendency of people to offer misguided worship to substitute gods. The pair came to the town of Lystra, and Paul saw faith in a man who had been lame from birth. Paul proclaimed healing by commanding the lame man to stand up and walk. When the man did as Paul commanded, a crowd gathered excitedly around the missionaries. The people began to shout that Paul and Barnabas must be two Greek gods who had come down in human form. So convinced were the people of this conclusion that the local pagan priest brought sacrifices to offer. Paul and Barnabas grasped the occasion to confront the people’s misguided worship and to testify about the one true God.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ACTS 14:1-28

Following their time in Antioch of Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas moved on to three cities in an adjoining region: Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. These three cities, along with Antioch of Pisidia, were located in the Roman province of Galatia. Some New Testament scholars suggest that these four churches were the original recipients of Paul's Letter to the Galatians.

As they had done in Antioch of Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas began their ministry in Iconium at the Jewish synagogue. The initial response of the people to the gospel was positive, and "a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed" (14:1). At the same time, unbelieving Jews began to foment opposition against the evangelists. Still, however, Paul and Barnabas remained in the city for a time and kept proclaiming the gospel boldly. Only when they discovered that a plot had been made to stone them did Paul and Barnabas depart from Iconium and move on to the cities of Lystra and Derbe.

The team's time in Lystra provides the biblical text for this session. Suffice it to say at this point that in Lystra Paul and Barnabas went from a high point of seeing a lame man healed to the pair's being mistaken as pagan deities to Paul's being stoned and dragged out of the city for dead (14:8-20). After Paul recovered from the stoning, the team left Lystra and went to Derbe. The summary of the work in Derbe is extremely brief—one verse—yet the team had good results; Paul and Barnabas "made many disciples" in Derbe (14:21).

Interestingly, after evangelizing in Derbe the team made a key decision about their remaining journey. They could travel southeast from Derbe across a well-known mountain pass and arrive in short order at Paul's hometown of Tarsus. From Tarsus, the overland trip back to their beginning point in Antioch of Syria was relatively short and easy to travel. Instead of taking the shorter, easier route, however, the team retraced their steps back through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia. Why? Because they saw the need to encourage and further instruct the new believers in those places.

New Christians in the region of Galatia would continue to face hostility from the gospel's opponents after Paul and Barnabas departed. The pair wanted the new believers to understand that following Christ by definition includes the likelihood of facing hardships and suffering. Further, Paul and Barnabas prayed for these new churches and saw to it that spiritual leaders were appointed in each congregation. Then after traveling south to the seacoast, the team sailed home to Antioch of Syria, where "they reported everything God had done with them and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

HEALING (Acts 14:8-10)

Careful readers of Acts will recall previous healing accounts of lame individuals (3:1-10; 9:32-35). A number of similarities have been noted between Peter's healing of the lame man at the temple in Jerusalem and Paul's healing of the lame man in Lystra. Part of Luke's purpose for including both miracle accounts may have been to emphasize that God was working through Paul in Gentile settings just as God had worked through Peter in Jewish settings.

VERSE 8

In Lystra a man was sitting who was without strength in his feet, had never walked, and had been lame from birth.

Paul and Barnabas had left the city of Iconium under a threat to their lives (14:5). Still, the pair kept preaching the gospel wherever they went. The small town of **Lystra** was located about eighteen miles south of Iconium in a valley at the juncture of two streams. Today the site is little more than an open field. In 6 BC, however, the Roman emperor awarded colony status to the town, and a contingent of Roman troops was garrisoned there.

As Paul and Barnabas evangelized in Lystra, their attention was drawn to an unnamed **man** who **was sitting** nearby. While the text does not specify the man was a beggar, his physical condition suggested as much. The writer of Acts used three descriptions to portray the man's seemingly hopeless situation. First, the man **was without strength in his feet**. He could not stand or walk. However, this was no recent accident or temporary disability. The man **had never walked**. Not as an adult. Not as a youngster. Not even as a toddler. He had been **lame from birth**.

VERSE 9

He listened as Paul spoke. After looking directly at him and seeing that he had faith to be healed,

That the lame man **listened as Paul spoke** suggests the apostle was preaching in an open-air venue, perhaps in the town's central plaza or marketplace. In both Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium, Paul had gone first to the synagogue to gain a hearing for the gospel. During his second missionary journey, Paul would preach in Athens both in the synagogue and the marketplace (17:17). Lystra possibly did not have a sufficient number of Jewish families living there to organize a synagogue. In any case, the lame man was situated

near enough to Paul as to hear and understand the apostle's message. That message is not detailed in Acts 14:9, but it undoubtedly included the gospel truths Paul consistently declared—including the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ, the resurrected Lord.

The words **looking directly** ("stedly beholding," KJV; "looking intently," ESV) indicate that Paul noticed something in the lame man's demeanor that showed he **had faith to be healed**. The Greek word translated *healed* ("made well," ESV) can refer to both physical healing and spiritual salvation. Perhaps the residents of Lystra, including this man, had heard reports of the "signs and wonders" (14:3) God had done through Paul and Barnabas in Iconium.

VERSE 10

Paul said in a loud voice, "Stand up on your feet!" And he jumped up and began to walk around.

Paul's response to the lame man's faith was to address him **in a loud voice**, perhaps so that everyone in the marketplace could hear. The simple command for the man to **stand** was qualified by two additional phrases: **up** ("upright," KJV, ESV) and **on your feet**. The word translated *up* (Greek, *orthos*) literally means "straight," "right," or "upright." It can be found embedded in a number of English terms such as *orthodoxy* ("right beliefs") and *orthodontist* ("one who corrects or straightens teeth"). The Greek term is found in only one other place in the New Testament, Hebrews 12:13, where it refers to walking on "straight paths." Thus, Paul commanded the man to do something he had never done in his entire life—something that both Paul and the man knew could not and would not happen apart from God's miraculous intervention.

The man's quick compliance with Paul's command showed the apostle had seen correctly that the man had faith: **he jumped up and began to walk around**. Earlier in Acts, the lame man who was healed outside the Jerusalem temple had made similar reponse to his healing (Acts 3:8). Just as God had worked through Peter to heal a lame man in Jerusalem, God worked through Paul in Lystra. God uses His servants as instruments of His grace and mercy.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article entitled "Healing, Divine" on page 719 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In your view, how is physical healing related to the gospel of Jesus Christ? How does physical healing demonstrate both the power and mercy of God?

REACTION (Acts 14:11-13)

VERSE 11

When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted, saying in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!”

The public reaction to the miraculous healing of the lame man was swift. The **crowds** who responded probably included those who had been listening to Paul speak (14:9) as well as others who were attracted by Paul’s loud command and the lame man’s immediate response.

Two things are noteworthy about the crowd’s reaction. First, onlookers responded **in the Lycaonian** [LIK ay OH nih uhn] **language**. Greek was the common language of trade at the time. The citizens of Lystra may also have spoken Latin, since the town was a Roman colony, but *Lycaonian* was the residents’ native language. Its use here reflects the people’s pagan background. In the face of an undeniable miracle, the people defaulted to the pagan beliefs and language they knew best.

Second, the people of the town concluded they had been visited by two of their pagan **gods ... in human form** (“in the likeness of men,” KJV, ESV). A possible explanation for the crowd’s reaction comes from the folklore around Lystra in Paul’s day. One pagan myth told the story of two gods who concealed their identity and walked through the hill country just west of Lystra. According to this legend, the gods asked for shelter from many residents in the area only to be turned down time after time. Finally, a poor, elderly couple welcomed the two gods into their humble home and held back nothing in providing care for them. Consequently, the gods rewarded the humble couple beyond comprehension and punished those who refused hospitality by sending a flood to destroy their homes. Perhaps the citizens of Lystra were reminded of this pagan myth and did not want to fall victim to a similar error of failing to recognize supposed divine visitors.

VERSE 12

Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.

The crowd identified Barnabas as **Zeus** [ZOOS] and Paul as **Hermes** [HUHR meeZ]. Zeus, the head of the Greek pantheon of gods, was frequently identified with the Roman god Jupiter; Hermes, the son of Zeus, was identified with the Roman god Mercury. Two inscriptions uncovered by modern archaeologists near Lystra list both Zeus and Hermes as gods who were worshiped in that area. One of the inscriptions referred to a priest of Zeus. The identification

of Barnabas with Zeus may have been because Barnabas was the older of the two men. Paul, as **the main speaker**, was identified with Hermes, who, in addition to being Zeus's messenger, was the patron god of orators.

VERSE 13

**The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the town,
brought bulls and wreaths to the gates because he intended, with
the crowds, to offer sacrifice.**

The local **priest of Zeus** may have been among the crowd who witnessed the lame man's healing. If not, then someone from the crowd must have hurried to the **temple** located **just outside the town** to inform the priest about the alleged divine visitors. The pagan priest would be expected to know what must be done to appease the gods.

The appropriate response would be **to offer sacrifice**. The Greek term rendered **bulls** can also refer to oxen. In either case, such animals comprised a noble and valuable sacrifice. The plural form *bulls* indicates that at least one animal would be offered for each of the visitors. Along with the animals, the priest brought multiple **wreaths** ("garlands," KJV, ESV) to adorn the sacrificial animals and which participants would wear in the ceremonial parade. Processions of this type often included musicians and other temple attendants who carried incense.

The phrase **to the gates** could refer either to the temple gates or to the gates of the walled town. If the phrase refers to the town gates, then what was envisioned likely was a procession that began there and made its way to the temple altars, where the sacrifices would then be slaughtered and a communal meal would be held.

The people in the crowd had listened to Paul's proclamation of the gospel and had witnessed God's power in the lame man's healing. In contrast to the lame man, however, the onlookers responded with the opposite of saving faith. They rejected the gospel and found a substitute explanation in their pagan beliefs. In the same way, many people today are either unable or unwilling to see God's hand in their lives. Rejecting faith in the one true God, they falsely attribute God's work to chance or mere human achievements.

EXPLORE FURTHER

In the article "Gods, Pagan" in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*, read the section titled "New Testament" on pages 658–659. In what ways are Christians today confronted by polytheism (belief in many gods)? By atheism (belief that no God exists)?

REDIRECTED (Acts 14:14-18)

When Paul and Barnabas realized the people of Lystra intended to worship them as gods, they quickly attempted to stop the crowd's misguided actions. Paul used the opportunity to passionately confront the people's pagan beliefs. In this tense situation, the apostle focused not on all the details of the gospel message but on one basic question: Why would anyone worship worthless things (false gods) and ignore the one true and living God who created everything?

VERSE 14

The apostles Barnabas and Paul tore their robes when they heard this and rushed into the crowd, shouting:

The Greek word rendered **apostles** literally means "those who are sent out on a mission with a message." At times in the New Testament, the word specifies the first followers of Jesus—that is, the twelve men whom Jesus called to be with Him and to go out preaching in His name (Mark 3:14-19). Neither **Barnabas** nor **Paul** were among the original twelve apostles. However, they both had been called by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel and sent out with the prayer support of the church at Antioch (Acts 13:2-3). Later, Paul would have to defend his authority as an apostle to some audiences (1 Cor. 9:1-2).

The two missionaries sent an extreme visual message to the crowd: they **tore their robes** ("rent their clothes," KJV). Ripping one's outer garments was a gesture of horror about an unacceptable situation—in this case a situation of people committing blasphemy. This was not a sin to be taken lightly (see Acts 12:20-23). Barnabas and Paul thus **rushed into the crowd, shouting** for the people to stop their blasphemous worship. Evidently, both men desperately tried to reason with the crowd.

VERSE 15

"People! Why are you doing these things? We are people also, just like you, and we are proclaiming good news to you, that you turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them."

Paul and Barnabas first attempted to assure the crowd that they were not gods but ordinary human beings (**we are people ... like you**). The people of Lystra had confused the nature and abilities of the two apostles with the God who had accomplished a miraculous deed of mercy through them. The lame man's healing pointed to God and His glory, not to Paul and Barnabas.

Next, the pair emphasized that the gospel message was meant to turn people away from these very kinds of actions **to the living God**. The Greek word translated **worthless things** (“vanities,” KJV; “vain things,” ESV) also can refer to things that are fruitless, useless, powerless, or lacking in truth (see 1 Cor. 15:17; Titus 3:9). Attributing divine status to human beings (or any created thing) is beyond foolish; it is dangerous. Offering worship to such *worthless things* is a sign of grave spiritual depravity (Rom. 1:24-25).

Paul and Barnabas then emphasized three basic truths about God. First, there is no pantheon of gods; there is only one true and living God. He is the Creator of everything—**the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them**. Paul later used a similar starting point in his address to the Greek philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:24). By and large, the Gentile audiences Paul addressed in his day were not atheistic. Rather, they worshiped a pantheon of false gods, some of which were connected to natural forces such as the sun, the soil, and the sea. Paul and Barnabas established the truth that God is one and is the sovereign Creator of everything. He alone is worthy of worship.

VERSE 16

In past generations he allowed all the nations to go their own way, A second truth about God was His patience with sinners. God withheld His wrath against Gentile nations in the past, allowing those nations to **go their own way** (“walk in their own ways,” KJV, ESV). In Athens, Paul expressed this same truth as God’s having “overlooked the times of ignorance” (17:30). He wrote in Romans 3:25 that “in His restraint God passed over the sins previously committed.” With the appearance of Jesus Christ, His atoning sacrifice on the cross, and His resurrection victory over sin and death, the way of salvation and eternal life was open to all. This was the good news that Paul and Barnabas preached to the people of Lystra.

VERSE 17

although he did not leave himself without a witness, since he did what is good by giving you rain from heaven and fruitful seasons and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.”

The third truth about God that Paul and Barnabas emphasized was His self-revelation to all people through nature—a truth we describe in theological terms as natural revelation. That is, while God had directly revealed His nature and ways to the people of Israel in the covenant, the exodus, and the law, all people could see evidence of God’s existence, power, and goodness through the created universe. The consistent gifts of **rain from heaven and fruitful seasons** (“crops in their season,” NIV) testified of God’s goodness.

Had the people of Lystra not been willfully blind, they could have recognized that the source of their daily **food** and joyful **hearts** was the one kind, gracious, and sovereign Creator of everything.

Bible scholars have debated why Paul and Barnabas did not speak to the crowd in Lystra of repentance, faith, Jesus, the cross, and the resurrection. The missionaries evidently had spoken of these important truths prior to this event (14:6-7). Later, in Athens, Paul would go on to speak to the philosophers about repentance and “the man [God] has appointed” to judge the world, proving this “to everyone by raising him from the dead” (17:31). In Lystra, however, the crowd did not seem to want to hear the rest of the gospel story. The people were mired in pagan ignorance.

VERSE 18

Even though they said these things, they barely stopped the crowds from sacrificing to them.

The citizens of Lystra had been so impressed by the miraculous healing of the lame man that they were determined to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas. The pressing need for the missionaries was to stop this misguided worship. The words **barely stopped** (“scarcely restrained,” ESV) suggest that while the two apostles eventually succeeded in their effort, they had to cut short their teaching momentarily.

EXPLORE FURTHER

When has a landscape or natural event revealed something to you about God’s power and goodness? What is the difference between appreciating nature and worshiping nature?

REJECTED (Acts 14:19-20)

These verses show human fickleness at its worst, especially in the context of a crowd. Some of the same people who previously tried to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas turned into a mob attempting to kill Paul.

VERSE 19

Some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and when they won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, thinking he was dead.

The Greek text of this verse contains a connecting term that can be translated “and” (KJV), “but” (ESV), or “then” (NIV). The term often connects (or contrasts) successive events in a narrative without any specific reference to a time interval between the events. In other words, the arrival in Lystra of Paul’s Jewish opponents **from Antioch and Iconium** may have occurred days or weeks after the events narrated in verses 11-18. This time gap is further supported by the curious absence of Barnabas during the stoning and by the mention in verse 20 that a group of disciples were now present in Lystra.

The **Jews** who came to Lystra evidently were some of the ones “filled with jealousy” (13:45) in Antioch of Pisidia and the “unbelieving Jews” (14:2) of Iconium. They followed Paul and Barnabas in an attempt to discredit the missionaries and the gospel message. Their strategy was to win over **the crowds**, stirring up the people against Jesus Christ and His messengers.

How were the Jews able to persuade the crowd in Lystra to take such a violent action against Paul as stoning him and dragging him outside the city for dead? They likely played on the crowd’s unfulfilled expectations regarding Paul and Barnabas’s being divine visitors. Further, the Jews may have charged that the missionaries were violating Roman law (see 17:6-7). Roman officials would not tolerate such violations in their colonies.

VERSE 20

After the disciples gathered around him, he got up and went into the town. The next day he left with Barnabas for Derbe.

Despite the crowd’s misguided worship of Paul and Barnabas and the mob’s stoning of Paul, some of the people of Lystra believed the gospel. These **disciples** discovered that Paul had not actually died from the stoning. They helped him get back into town and recover enough so that Paul and Barnabas could leave Lystra the following day.

EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you or someone you know faced hostility or other forms of opposition to the gospel message? How can you encourage believers who are taking the gospel to places where persecution is likely?

1. Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Project Gutenberg [online], [cited 7 April 2017]. Available from the Internet: gutenberg.org.

AVAILABLE TO ALL

Salvation is available to everyone through faith in Jesus alone.

I don't like confrontation. For example, if my family is dining at a restaurant and the server doesn't have a pleasant attitude or our orders get a little mixed up, I tend to remain silent. To quote what one of my granddaughters likes to say about her meals at home, "I get what I get, and I don't pitch a fit." Of course, I know there are some situations when confronting others is unavoidable. Even in those situations, however, I don't enjoy the act of confrontation.

Some Christians have a similar attitude about church business meetings. Many of these meetings are routine and conflict-free. Items on the agenda have been publicized beforehand, and all the members are in basic agreement. Sometimes, though, difficult situations arise, and churches must make tough decisions. In these cases, some members may hold opposing views and express them passionately, while others withdraw from the conversation because they dislike conflict. The latter members prefer to keep the peace at all costs rather than arguing for biblical solutions to the church's situation.

This session focuses on the Jerusalem Council, the first major business meeting of the first-century church. There was nothing routine about the meeting's agenda. The church's gospel mission was at stake. As Paul and other missionaries took the gospel farther and deeper into the Gentile world, a thorny question kept emerging: Must Gentile converts to Christ accept the Jewish law—particularly the command of ritual circumcision for males—in addition to believing in Jesus? The heart of this crucial debate was whether anything other than faith was necessary for salvation. It was time to confront the question head-on and allow the Holy Spirit to guide them to the truth.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ACTS 15:1-35

Both structurally and thematically, chapter 15 stands at the center of the Book of Acts. God had been nudging the church in Jerusalem toward His

goal of carrying the gospel “to the end of the earth” (1:8). The first believers, of course, were Jews who became followers of Christ. They evangelized successfully in and around Jerusalem (chaps. 2–7). Then Philip began to preach the gospel in areas beyond Jerusalem. He went to the region of Samaria, and people there responded with joy to the gospel’s power (8:4–8). He then traveled to the southern edge of Judea and led an Ethiopian official to faith in Christ (8:26–40). Later, the church in Antioch of Syria set apart Barnabas and Saul (Paul) for the Spirit-led work of carrying the gospel message to still more distant regions (13–14). In all of these regions, Gentiles came to faith in Christ.

While growth was a matter of great joy for the early church, it was accompanied by a potentially crippling controversy. Many Jewish Christians continued to hold firmly to their Jewish rituals and traditions. The more legalistic of these Jewish believers insisted that new Gentile converts must accept the laws and rituals of Judaism alongside their confession of Jesus Christ as Savior. Jewish legalists refused fellowship with Gentile believers who would not enter the covenant community through the sign of male circumcision and by observing the ceremonies of the law.

This issue came to a head in Antioch after some men from Judea arrived and began to teach that Gentiles could not be truly saved without submitting to circumcision (15:1). Paul and Barnabas engaged these men in “serious argument and debate,” and all involved agreed to convene a council in Jerusalem to settle the matter (15:2).

The gathering described in Acts 15:4–29 has been called the first church council. Participants included members of the Jerusalem congregation at large plus two groups of church leaders: the apostles and church elders (15:4). Speakers at the council included Simon Peter (15:7–11), Barnabas and Paul (15:12), and James, the half-brother of Jesus and pastoral leader of the Jerusalem church (15:13–21). The council reported its conclusions in a letter they sent to the Antioch congregation (15:22–29).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

NO DISTINCTION (Acts 15:6–11)

When the delegation from Antioch of Syria arrived in Jerusalem, a broad group of believers described as “the church, the apostles, and the elders” (15:4) welcomed them. Some in this larger group also “belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (15:5). In other words, they were sticklers regarding the law of Moses and its rituals. They immediately began to insist that all male

Gentile converts needed to undergo circumcision and observe the law of Moses. In other words, converts must become Jews before they could become Christians. Evidently, this issue was then referred to the church leaders.

VERSE 6

The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter.

The Greek word rendered **apostles** literally means “those who are sent out [on a mission].” In Acts 1:2, Luke specified this word referred to the men whom Jesus had chosen to carry the gospel message to the world after His ascension and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. These apostles (minus Judas Iscariot, who hanged himself after his betrayal of Jesus) are listed in Acts 1:13; they became the recognized gospel teachers and authorities in the early church.

As mentioned in a previous session, Luke also referred to Barnabas and Paul as apostles in his reporting of the first missionary journey (see 14:4,14). Thus, these two men clearly were part of the *apostles* mentioned in Acts 15:6 along with Simon Peter, who later testified to the leadership group about an experience of Gentiles’ receiving salvation through faith alone. Bible students disagree on the question of whether the council leader named James (15:13) is the original apostle identified in 1:13 as “James the son of Alphaeus.” Beyond the mention of Peter and (perhaps) James, this account does not mention any other original apostles by name. Still, some of them may well have been present and involved in the debate.

The word rendered **elders** originally referred to older leading men in the Jewish community. In the Gospels the term often pointed to community leaders who knew and sought to preserve the ancient ways and traditions (see Mark 7:3,5). At times they held significant influence as judges alongside the scribes and chief priests (Acts 4:5; 6:12; 23:14; 24:1; 25:15). In the course of time, some of these *elders* became followers of Christ, and the term came to be associated with wise, trustworthy church leaders (see 11:30; 14:23; 16:4).

In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul mentioned that he had once visited with the Jerusalem church leaders in a private session to let them evaluate the gospel message he was preaching (Gal. 2:2). Some Bible scholars identify that private meeting with the gathering of apostles and elders described here in Acts 15:6-21. The issue before the Jerusalem council was the same issue Paul addressed passionately in Galatians. Was salvation received by grace through faith in Christ alone or gained by a combination of faith and works? Because of the chronology of Paul’s ministry, however, other Bible scholars conclude that the apostle’s private meeting with Jerusalem church leaders likely took place when Paul and Barnabas brought the famine relief offering to Jerusalem (see Acts 11:29-30), a meeting Luke chose not to describe in Acts.

VERSE 7

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them: “Brothers and sisters, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe.

The meeting of apostles and elders generated **much debate** (“much disputing,” KJV; “much discussion,” NIV). Indeed, the question of what salvation involves was as crucial to the gospel’s advance then as it is today. The church must have right doctrine as the foundation of its proclamation and actions. Right doctrine needs to derive from God’s revelation of truth, not from mere human opinions or traditions.

Peter was one council participant who could provide such divinely revealed instruction on the matter of salvation. He had been with Jesus as a disciple and an apostle. He had heard Jesus teach about the kingdom of God. The risen Lord had commissioned Peter, along with the other apostles, to proclaim “repentance for forgiveness of sins … in his name to all the nations” (Luke 24:47). When Peter took the floor and addressed the council, however, one post-resurrection experience dominated his testimony. This event more than any other convinced Peter that God would use him as a mouthpiece through whom **the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe.** Peter spoke of the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, along with his relatives and close friends (see Acts 10:1–11:18).

VERSE 8

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us.

Peter did not call Cornelius by name in his council address, but he had the centurion and the other Gentiles from Cornelius’s house in mind when he spoke of God’s bearing **witness to them.** God had revealed life-changing truth to Peter through that experience. In a vision prior to Peter’s visit to Cornelius’s house, God revealed to the apostle that he must not call impure what God has made clean (Acts 10:15). That revelation laid the foundation for what would occur later at Cornelius’s house. There Peter—as he was preaching—watched **the Holy Spirit** come upon Gentile believers in the same way the Spirit had come upon Jewish believers in Jerusalem at Pentecost (10:44–48; compare 2:1–4). The experience taught Peter that God accepted Gentile believers into the kingdom through faith in Jesus alone. No male circumcision was required. No commitment to obey Jewish ceremonies and traditions. Salvation was by grace through faith in Christ, period.

The phrase **who knows the heart** (a single word in the Greek text) emphasizes that God accepted Cornelius and the other new Gentile believers based on their faith, not their works. Theirs was a circumcision of the heart, not the flesh (Rom. 2:28-29). God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the Gentile believers was sufficient evidence to convince Peter that God accepted them.

VERSE 9

He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

The genuineness of the Gentiles' salvation **by faith** gave Peter conclusive evidence that God **made no distinction** ("put no difference," KJV; "did not discriminate," NIV) between Jews and Gentiles in the new covenant. Too often, believers of one ethnicity or social class are tempted to think of themselves as better than other people groups. God makes no such distinction among sinners (Rom. 3:22-23); His church must not make false dichotomies either. Salvation is available to all who place their faith in Jesus.

VERSE 10

Now then, why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the disciples' necks that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?

With the words **now then** ("now therefore," KJV), Peter called for his listeners to draw a conclusion about the issue at hand. He put the challenge in the form of a rhetorical question, the content of which makes clear that Peter directed it primarily at the legalists.

First, Peter asserted that by adding works requirements to the gospel, the legalists were **testing God** ("tempt ye God," KJV). The Greek word rendered *testing* can also mean "to try or attempt," "to prove something's (or someone's) genuineness," or "to tempt." The Scripture warns God's people not to test the Lord through unbelief (Deut. 6:16; Luke 4:12). The Israelites of old had tested God during their years in the wilderness—to their detriment (Ex. 17:2,7; Num. 14:22-23; see also Ps. 95:8-11). Further, Peter's hearers likely knew of the Ananias and Sapphira's sad end after they tested God during the church's early days in Jerusalem (Acts 5:1-11). Peter's question implied the warning that to refuse to see God's acceptance of Gentiles on the basis of their faith in Jesus was to oppose God. In his earlier report to believers in Jerusalem about Cornelius's conversion, Peter made a similar point (Acts 11:17).

Peter referred to the legalists' demand for Gentile circumcision as **putting a yoke on the disciples' necks**. Literally, a yoke was a wooden frame placed

on the necks of working animals so they could pull a plow or wagon as a team. Figuratively, the term could have either negative or positive connotations. For example, Paul warned about Jewish legalism in Galatians 5:1, urging believers not to submit to “a yoke of slavery.” Positively, Jesus invited weary, burdened people to take up His yoke, which is easy (see Matt. 11:28-30).

In addressing the Jerusalem council, Peter, like Paul, used the word *yoke* in the negative sense. Requiring Gentile believers to submit to circumcision and obey the ritual laws of the Old Testament was an unnecessary burden for entry into the new covenant community. God had not demanded these acts from Gentiles; the church should not have required them either.

Peter’s argument at the council was not about the law’s value or importance but rather its purpose. Even for Jewish believers and their **ancestors**, the Israelites of old, keeping the law had never been sufficient for salvation, for the obvious reason that no one, Jew nor Gentile, could keep the law perfectly. Instead, the law showed their sinful nature and need for a sinless Savior (see Gal. 3:19-25).

VERSE 11

On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are.”

Peter went a step further in his challenge to Jewish believers at the council. He underscored the belief that Jews are saved in the same way Gentiles are saved—**through the grace of the Lord Jesus**. Peter echoed the words that Paul had preached in Antioch of Pisidia: “Everyone who believes is justified through him from everything that you could not be justified from through the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39).

Peter’s testimony and challenge to the group of apostles and elders silenced the intense debate that had preceded his speech (15:12; compare 15:7). Following Peter’s address, Barnabas and Paul testified about “the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” (15:12). Then James, the pastoral leader of the church in Jerusalem, addressed the group, quoting Old Testament Scripture that pointed to the truth of God’s acceptance of Gentiles (15:13-18).

EXPLORE FURTHER

In what ways do groups today add requirements to salvation beyond having faith in Jesus Christ? How does a belief in salvation by grace through faith build fellowship among believers of different backgrounds?

CLEAR EXPECTATIONS (Acts 15:24-29)

It fell to James, the pastoral leader of the Jerusalem church, not only to support with Scripture the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone but also to propose a way forward toward unity and fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The gospel mission to all the nations would either be helped or hindered by the council's action. Thus, James grounded his proposal in Scripture and then recommended the following: (1) add no requirements for Gentiles' salvation beyond faith in Christ; (2) urge Gentile converts to avoid certain behaviors out of respect for the law and their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters (15:15-21). The apostles and elders, along with the whole church, agreed with James's proposal. The group chose two men to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch with a letter that spelled out the council's findings and recommendations (Acts 15:22-23).

VERSE 24

Since we have heard that some without our authorization went out from us and troubled you with their words and unsettled your hearts,

Luke appears to have recorded the council's final report verbatim in 15:23-29. The report was written in the form of a typical epistle, or letter, of the time. It began with a standard salutation, including the identification of the letter's senders and recipients plus a word of greeting (15:23). Even in the salutation, however, the apostles and elders of Jerusalem made clear that they regarded the Gentile believers in Antioch and the surrounding regions as fellow Christians in the fullest sense.

The body of the letter began with a statement of findings—that is, an explanation of how the controversy developed and what resulted from it. First, the letter pinpointed the source of the conflict. Luke already had identified the source in 15:1 when he reported that “some men … from Judea” came into the region around Antioch of Syria and began to teach the necessity of male circumcision for salvation (see also 15:5). Neither Luke nor the council's letter identified the men by name.

Second, the apostles and elders acknowledged that the false teachers were connected to the Jerusalem church (**from us**). However, the men had acted **without ... authorization** from either the church or its leaders. Third, the letter admits that the false teachers had **troubled** (“disturbed,” NIV) Gentile believers, needlessly causing them to be **unsettled**. The Greek word rendered *unsettled*, found only here in the New Testament, literally means “to pack up baggage to relocate.” It also came to describe dismantling, or plundering, an enemy. The false teachers might have believed they were protecting the

purity of God's people. In reality, they were plundering the faith of Gentile Christians and stirring up discord in the church.

VERSES 25-26

we have unanimously decided to select men and send them to you along with our dearly loved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In contrast to the disunity caused by the legalistic agitators, the Jerusalem council participants were fully united in their decision. The Greek word rendered **unanimously** ("with one accord," KJV) occurs ten times in the Book of Acts. It means "to have the same mind, purpose, or impulse." Luke used the term frequently in Acts to describe the early church's sense of community and purpose in Christ (see 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12). Thus, the church at Antioch could be confident that the letter's findings and recommendations represented the real heart of the Jerusalem church. Having two men from that church accompany **Barnabas and Paul** to deliver and present the letter would build further unity between Jewish Christians and Gentile believers.

Paul and Barnabas had been fully engaged in taking the gospel to the Gentiles—and would continue to do so in the future. Consequently, they were also on the front line of opposition to the legalists' false teaching. Paul penned strong words against false teachers in many of his epistles (see Rom. 16:16-18; Gal. 5:12-13; Phil. 3:2-3; Col. 2:16-18; 1 Tim. 6:3-6; Titus 1:10-11). The apostles and elders in Jerusalem wanted the Gentile believers in Antioch to know that Paul and Barnabas were **dearly loved** and respected for the courageous devotion they showed **for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

VERSE 27

Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who will personally report the same things by word of mouth.

The council's report, agreed upon unanimously by the council participants, would be communicated to the believers in Antioch by two means. First, the letter presumably would be read aloud to the congregation. Either Paul or Barnabas could serve as the reader. Second, the two emissaries from the Jerusalem church would **personally report the same things by word of mouth.** These two emissaries, identified as **Judas and Silas**, were tasked with answering questions, providing additional details, and promoting unity among the believers.

Little else is known in Scripture about the emissary named Judas. His surname, Barsabbas [bahr SAB uhs] (see 15:22), means "son of the Sabbath."

This was also the surname of Joseph (Justus), one of the two disciples proposed as a replacement for Judas Iscariot among the apostles (1:23).

Both Judas and Silas, the second emissary, were recognized as “leading men” (15:23) in the Jerusalem church and also as “prophets” (15:32). Silas later joined Paul on his second missionary journey (15:40). He was likely the coworker Paul referred to as “Silvanus” (a longer form of the name *Silas*) in several epistles (2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1).

VERSES 28-29

For it was the Holy Spirit's decision—and ours—not to place further burdens on you beyond these requirements: that you abstain from food offered to idols, from blood, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. You will do well if you keep yourselves from these things.

Farewell.”

These two verses express the council’s main conclusion and recommendations. They made the **decision** not by majority vote but with **the Holy Spirit’s** guidance. The report does not specify how the council discerned the Spirit’s leadership in the matter. Perhaps it was the totality of evidence from the testimonies of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas alongside the confirmation of Scripture and the council’s spirit of unity during the course of their debate. Although prayer was not specifically mentioned in the council’s report or in Luke’s description of the event, it would have been unusual for Christian leaders to decide such an important matter without praying about it. In addition, one or more of the Christian prophets in attendance may have received a Spirit-inspired word from the Lord.

The council’s conclusion was **not to place further burdens** on Gentiles in regard to being saved. That is, Gentiles did not have to submit to circumcision (become Jews) before they could become Christians. Salvation was by grace through faith alone. On the other hand, genuine faith in Christ transforms lives. It shapes the believer’s lifestyle in God-honoring ways and thus provides a basis for close fellowship among believers of different cultures. Thus, the council identified four **requirements** (“necessary things,” KJV) for Gentiles to honor. These stipulations had nothing to do with earning salvation; they had everything to do with promoting unity between Jewish and Gentile believers through a shared commitment to holy living.

In his epistles, the apostle Paul continued to encourage believers to maintain moral behaviors while refuting the belief that they were required for salvation. For example, he taught believers to avoid sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:1-2; Col. 3:5). He urged Christians not to allow the issue of food

obtained at a pagan temple's market to divide them into opposing camps. Paul set a personal example of unity when he wrote, "Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won't cause my brother or sister to fall" (1 Cor. 8:13).

EXPLORE FURTHER

How would you explain to a new believer the relationship between what is required for salvation and what is characteristic of holy living? What is a situation in which you could demonstrate Paul's example of unity?

SECURE ENCOURAGEMENT (Acts 15:30-31)

VERSES 30-31

So they were sent off and went down to Antioch, and after gathering the assembly, they delivered the letter. When they read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

With the decisions rendered and the report written, the council leaders sent Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas **down to Antioch**. The word *down* indicates that the delegation, although traveling northward, moved from a higher elevation to a lower one. In Antioch, the group called together **the assembly** ("the multitude," KJV; "the congregation," ESV; "the church," NIV) and formally **delivered the letter** from the council.

The antecedent of the plural pronoun **they** in verse 30 is clear: the pronoun refers to the group including Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas. In verse 31, however, it is not as certain (from a grammatical standpoint) who actually **read** the letter aloud to the congregation and who **rejoiced because of** the letter's **encouragement**. Judas and/or Silas may have read the letter (see 15:32), and presumably it was the Antioch congregation who *rejoiced*. The Gentile believers were glad the question of circumcision had been resolved. Further, they were willing to follow certain practices that would promote fellowship and the common mission of reaching the world with the gospel.

EXPLORE FURTHER

What parts of the letter in Acts 15:23-29 would best encourage your church congregation at this time? Explain your response. How has this Bible passage encouraged you personally as a Christian?

THE PROMISED ONE

Jesus is the promised Messiah, the One who provides salvation to all who trust Him.

For many children, the anticipation of opening gifts on Christmas morning makes it difficult to go to sleep the night before. That was the case in my home when I was young. My father knew better than to put our gifts under the tree too soon after my siblings and I went to bed. He knew that if he did, my brother and I would get up at two o'clock in the morning, check the tree, and then announce—loudly—that it was time to open gifts.

Dad's strategy to curb our middle-of-the-night opening of gifts was to set his alarm for some time around six a.m. He would quietly get up and put the gifts under the tree, and then return to bed until we awoke later on Christmas morning. As we got older, my brother and I grew wise to Dad's routine. We awoke early too, and we would listen for Dad to return to bed. When he did, we jumped up and bounded to the tree, shouting as we went that it was time to open gifts. We couldn't wait any longer!

A child's expectations on Christmas morning is but a drop in an ocean when compared to the expectations of many first-century Jews for the Messiah. This session focuses on Simeon and Anna, two worshipers of God who were watching and waiting at the temple to see the Lord's Messiah.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

LUKE 2:1-40; ACTS 13:23-25

Luke began his Gospel by intertwining the accounts of two extraordinary births—the births of John, the prophetic forerunner of the Messiah, and of Jesus the Messiah. An angel announced both of these births beforehand to unlikely mothers. John's mother, Elizabeth, was childless and well beyond

childbearing years. Jesus' mother, Mary, was an unmarried virgin. Both births signaled that God was fulfilling His promise to provide the way of salvation for sinful humanity. The promised Messiah would come to the people of Israel, yet He would open the way of salvation to all people.

The main background Scripture for this session is Luke 2:1-40, which reports not only the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth but also the first responders to that event. Acts 13:23-25 describes a slice of Paul's message in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia about Jesus being the promised Savior. Jesus' birth fulfilled Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah.

Luke 2 opens with a succinct description of Joseph and Mary traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem to comply with an empire-wide census registration (2:1-7). Mary was at full term with her pregnancy. She already knew that the Child to be born was the promised messianic King (see 1:26-33). With Joseph unable to secure a birthing room in the crowded village, Mary had to lay her newborn Child in a manger.

In 2:8-20, Luke described the shepherds' response to the Savior's birth. An angel announced the Messiah's birth to the shepherds in a field, and they quickly went into Bethlehem to see the Child for themselves. Mary was amazed by the shepherds' visit and meditated on the meaning of their words. Afterward, the shepherds returned to their work with joy, "glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard" (2:20).

In 2:25-38, Luke described two incidents that happened in the temple area when Joseph and Mary returned there with the Christ child to dedicate Jesus as their firstborn son (2:22-24). First, a devout man named Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and proclaimed that God had shown him this Child was the promised Messiah (2:25-35). Second, an elderly widow and prophetess named Anna approached the baby Jesus and began to thank God, telling other bystanders this Child was the One who would bring about the redemption of Jerusalem (2:36-38). These two incidents are the focus of this session.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

SIMEON'S PRAISE (Luke 2:25-32)

VERSE 25

There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to Israel's consolation, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

Simeon was a common Jewish name that pointed back to one of the sons of Jacob (Gen. 35:23) and a tribe of Israel (Num. 1:22-23). The *Simeon* mentioned in Luke 2:25 is not identified by his family lineage. We aren't told who his father was or if he was from a priestly family. Those details were not as important to the Gospel writer as were four characteristics the man displayed.

First, Simeon was **righteous**. The Greek word used here did not imply sinless perfection; it described a person who was upright, just, and fair. The term can be found elsewhere in the New Testament describing Mary's husband, Joseph (Matt. 1:19), John the Baptist's parents (Luke 1:6), Joseph of Arimathea (23:50), and Cornelius, a Gentile centurion (Acts 10:22). Like these individuals, Simeon was a man who could be counted on to do the right thing.

Second, Simeon was **devout**. This word in the Greek occurs only here in Luke's Gospel and three times in the Book of Acts (2:5; 8:2; 22:12). The word originally was used to describe a cautious or discreet person. It later came to describe a person who feared God and responded to Him with sincere piety and devotion.

Third, Simeon was characterized by his **looking forward to Israel's consolation**. The Greek word rendered *consolation* can also mean "encouragement" or "exhortation." Israelite prophets such as Isaiah used a corresponding Hebrew term to foretell the restoration God had in mind for His people after the exile (see Isa. 40:1; 49:13; 51:3). Simeon was among the devout Jews waiting expectantly for God to fulfill His promise to Israel by inaugurating His kingdom through the Messiah.

Finally, Simeon characteristically showed that **the Holy Spirit was on him**. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit is a prominent theme in both Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts. The angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah that his son John would be "filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15). The same angel announced to the virgin Mary that the Holy Spirit would empower her to miraculously become pregnant and give birth to God's Son (1:35). The Spirit guided Simeon to recognize the Messiah even as a newborn in His mother's arms.

VERSE 26

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he saw the Lord's Messiah.

The Holy Spirit was not just a passive presence in Simeon's life; He had promised that Simeon **would not see death before he saw the Lord's Messiah**. The Greek word translated **revealed** was used to describe a divine message, either a warning or an instruction. The word was used of God's warnings to Joseph in dreams about dangers from Herod and Archelaus (Matt. 2:12,22).

The English word *Messiah* (“Christ,” KJV, ESV) is a transliteration of a Hebrew word that means “one anointed with oil.” New Testament writers translated the Hebrew term by using the Greek term *christos* [KRIS tahs], which is rendered in English as *Christ*. In ancient Israel, the practice of anointing with oil was especially associated with two key leadership roles: the priesthood and the kingship. Anointing these leaders was a way of setting them apart for service and affirming their God-given authority.

Old Testament prophets foretold that God would one day send forth not just another anointed leader but rather *the Lord’s Messiah*, who would be the ultimate prophet, priest, and king (Isa. 9:6-7; Jer. 33:15-16; Micah 5:2). By the time Jesus was born, various Jewish sects held conflicting views about the Messiah. Many Jews expected the Messiah to be a military ruler like King David of old who would throw off Rome’s control and reestablish the kingdom of Israel as a political power.

VERSE 27

Guided by the Spirit, he entered the temple. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform for him what was customary under the law,

For a third time Luke emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in Simeon’s life. The Spirit **guided** Simeon to enter **the temple** courtyards just as Joseph and Mary **brought in the child Jesus** to carry out the sacrifice for dedicating their firstborn son to the Lord (Luke 2:22-24; see Ex. 13:11-16). Two important facts emerge from this verse. First, Joseph and Mary gave careful attention to carrying out the stipulations of **the law** regarding the Christ child. Jesus had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). The word for *temple* in this verse most likely refers to the courtyard areas rather than the inner area where priests offered the sacrifices.

Second, the Spirit arranged a divine appointment in order to keep a promise that Simeon, before he died, would see the Messiah. Jesus later taught His disciples that the Holy Spirit’s role after the resurrection would be to testify about Jesus (John 15:26). Even today, the Spirit works powerfully behind the scenes to bring alert Christians alongside searching unbelievers for the purpose of life-changing gospel encounters.

Luke used the Greek word for **parents** in referring to Joseph and Mary. Alert readers of Luke’s Gospel know that Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father. Mary was a virgin when the Holy Spirit empowered her to conceive (Luke 1:34-35). Further, the Lord sent an angel to assure Joseph that the Spirit had empowered Mary to conceive (Matt. 1:20). Joseph married Mary and thus served as her Child’s adopted, legal father.

VERSES 28-29

Simeon took him up in his arms, praised God, and said, Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace, as you promised.

Simeon had been promised that he would see the Lord's Messiah, but he also had a message that Mary and Joseph (and other bystanders) needed to hear. Precisely how Simeon recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah is not stated. Luke did not state precisely how his readers would conclude that it was the work of the Holy Spirit. In any case, Simeon gratefully took the baby Jesus **in his arms** and **praised God**.

The song of praise in Luke 2:29-32 is the third such song Luke included in Jesus' birth narrative, following those expressed by Mary (1:46-55) and Zechariah (1:68-79). Simeon addressed God as **Master** ("Lord," KJV, ESV; "Sovereign Lord," NIV). This Greek word occurs only ten times in the New Testament and emphasizes the legal control and authority that one has over another person. Here Simeon acknowledged God's sovereignty not only over his life but also over all creation and history.

As Simeon gazed down on the infant Jesus, he understood that God's plan of redemption was unfolding. This Child was the promised Messiah and Savior. The word **now** is emphatic both in its position—it is the song's first word—and its meaning. God was fulfilling His promise of salvation.

The words **dismiss** ("depart," KJV, ESV) **your servant in peace** may have been a request for the Lord to discharge Simeon from his vigil of waiting for the Messiah. The Greek root word rendered *dismiss* can also mean "to release, let go, send away." It has this meaning, for example, in Acts 15:33 to describe Judas and Silas's departure from Antioch of Syria after delivering the Jerusalem council's letter regarding Gentiles and circumcision. More likely, however, especially in light of Luke 2:26, Simeon was expressing a sense of assurance that he could die without fear. The picture is that of a faithful servant who had completed his life's work and was ready for his eternal reward.

VERSES 30-31

For my eyes have seen your salvation. You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples—

As evidence of God's faithfulness, Simeon pointed to what he had just experienced with the baby Jesus: he had seen God's **salvation**. To this point in Simeon's story, Jesus had been referred to as the One who would bring "Israel's consolation" (2:25) and as "the Lord's Messiah" (2:26). The form of the Greek word rendered *salvation* can refer both to the means (or agent) of deliverance as well as to the deliverance itself. Acts 28:28 uses the same word to describe Jesus as the "salvation of God."

Simeon also praised God for presenting the Messiah **in the presence of all peoples**. The phrase rendered *all peoples* (“all the people,” KJV; “all nations,” NIV) could refer to all the Jewish people—not just the priestly class. On the other hand, it could refer to Jews and Gentiles together. The outermost courtyard of the temple was called the court of the Gentiles, an area where Gentiles could come pay homage to the God of Israel. It was also an area where the poor and sick stationed themselves to beg for alms or help. Perhaps Simeon was standing in this courtyard when he encountered Joseph and Mary and took the infant Savior in his arms.

VERSE 32

a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel.

The word **light** further described the nature of God’s salvation as well as the Messiah who brought that salvation. Centuries before this event, the prophet Isaiah had foreseen that God’s Servant-Messiah would be “a light for the nations” and would bring “salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, prophesied that John would prepare the way for the Messiah to “shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79). The imagery of salvation as light is emphatic in the Gospel of John, where the Gospel writer declared, “He [John the Baptist] was not the light, but he came to testify about the light. The true light that gives light to everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:8–9).

Simeon’s reference to the *light* as **revelation to the Gentiles** emphasizes the universal aspect of Jesus’ salvation. It is not limited to a single ethnic group but is available to all people everywhere through faith. Spoken at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly life, Simeon’s words foreshadow the mission to the Gentiles that the Book of Acts chronicles.

On the other hand, the worldwide gospel mission would not exclude Israel. This *light* would also be **glory to [God’s] people Israel**. Isaiah’s description of the role of the Lord’s Servant-Messiah involved “raising up the tribes of Jacob and restoring the protected ones of Israel” as well as being “a light for the nations” (Isa. 49:6). Both roles are important aspects of the gospel.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Salvation” on pages 1403–1404 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How do Simeon’s words compare and contrast to what you felt before and after you met Jesus and placed your faith in Him?

A FUTURE PIERCING (Luke 2:33-35)

VERSE 33

His father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

Simeon's prayer that he spoke while holding Jesus **amazed** ("marveled," ESV, NIV) Joseph and Mary. Readers need to understand the designation of Joseph as Jesus' **father** in the same way as the reference to him as one of Jesus' "parents" (Luke 2:27). Joseph served as Jesus' adopted, legal parent but was not the Child's biological father. Some ancient manuscripts of this verse avoid a misunderstanding with the reading "Joseph and his mother."

Interestingly, both Joseph and Mary had previously heard angelic messages about the Christ child's unique nature and role in God's salvation (Matt. 1:20-21; Luke 1:31-33). Thus, their amazement at Simeon's words likely pointed more to how God was reaffirming His promises to them.

VERSE 34

Then Simeon blessed them and told his mother Mary: "Indeed, this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed—

Simeon is not identified as a priest; nevertheless, he **blessed** Joseph and Mary as the parents of the Savior. In Scripture, to bless generally involves making a prayer-wish for someone's happiness and well-being. It can also denote a congratulatory spirit for receiving God's favor. We do not know the substance of Simeon's blessing, but perhaps he voiced a prayer-wish for them in their unique roles as the Messiah's earthly parents.

Simeon then turned his attention specifically to Mary. He expressed a prophetic message to her regarding the Child's future. Some Bible students speculate that the prophecy may have been directed to Mary alone because Joseph would die before the events came to pass. In any event, the prophetic message emphasized four inevitable results of the Messiah's appearance in that historical moment.

First, the Christ **child** would **cause the fall and rise of many in Israel**. We can understand this phrase as referring to either one or two groups. That is, Simeon may have meant one group, the *many in Israel* who would fall in humility and repentance before Christ and thus rise to a new life of faith. More likely, however, the prophecy speaks of two separate groups within the Jewish community: a group who would fall from covenant favor by rejecting Christ and another group who would rise to the fulfillment of God's covenant promises by believing in Christ.

Second, the Christ child would be a **sign that will be opposed**. The Greek word rendered **sign** refers in the New Testament to a miraculous event that confirms or attests God's activity. Thus, the word often appears in tandem with such terms as "miracles" and "wonders" (see Acts 2:22). Here in Luke 2:34, Simeon probably meant that Jesus' entire life—from His miraculous birth through a virgin mother to His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension—would clearly indicate that God was at work among His people. Sadly, however, not everyone would accept that truth. Some would personally witness many signs of Jesus' divine nature yet refuse to believe in Him (see John 12:37).

VERSE 35

and a sword will pierce your own soul—that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

Third, the Christ child's destiny would become **a sword** that would **pierce Mary's soul**. The efforts of different English translations to set off this third result by using either dashes (CSB) or parentheses (KJV, ESV) or by moving the words to the end of verse 35 (NIV) reveal a consensus that it related directly and specifically to Mary. The Greek word rendered *sword* could refer either to a large, broad sword or to a long spear, or javelin. Here the word is used figuratively to describe an experience of severe heartache and sorrow. This God-favored woman and mother, more than any other human connected to Jesus, would suffer deep pangs of grief as a result of the Child's destiny as Savior.

Fourth, the Christ child's destiny would lay bare **the thoughts of many hearts**. The Greek word rendered *thoughts* can refer either to ideas people are considering or conclusions they have reached. Although the word does not have an inherently negative connotation, throughout Luke's Gospel it is only used disparagingly. That is, those who rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah revealed that their innermost thoughts were evil, not righteous.

EXPLORE FURTHER

What is the connection between a person's innermost thoughts and that person's actions? How does a faith relationship with Jesus Christ impact one's innermost thoughts? What kinds of actions can be expected from someone whose thinking has been transformed by faith in Christ?

ANNA'S AFFIRMATION (Luke 2:36-38)

Mary and Joseph's encounter with Simeon was followed by an encounter with a prophetess. God provided another witness to Jesus' identity and mission.

VERSES 36-37

There was also a prophetess, Anna, a daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well along in years, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and was a widow for eighty-four years. She did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers.

Luke introduced **Anna** into the narrative by giving several pertinent biographical facts about her. First, she was a **prophetess**. Although the Israelite office of prophet was predominately male, several Old Testament-era women also served in this role, including Moses' sister Miriam (Ex. 15:20); Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth (Judg. 4:4); and possibly Isaiah's wife (Isa. 8:3). In the New Testament, Philip the evangelist (and deacon) was said to have "four virgin daughters who prophesied" (Acts 21:9). Like the prophet, a prophetess was specially gifted with insight into the Lord's ways and was responsible to inform—or warn—God's people.

Luke then gave Anna's family background. Her father was **Phanuel** [fuh NYOO uhl] **of the tribe of Asher**. The name *Phanuel* ("Penuel," NIV) appears only here in the New Testament; it probably is a form of the Hebrew name that means "face of God" (see Gen 32:30-31). Luke probably mentioned Anna's father and tribe to emphasize her credentials as an Israelite.

Next, Luke added three details about Anna's age and marital status. First, the phrase **well along in years** literally means "advanced in days, many." Anna was elderly when she first saw the Christ child. Second, she had been married for **seven years** earlier in life. Third, her husband had died—Luke did not specify the cause of death, the husband's age, or if the couple had any children—and Anna had lived as a **widow for eighty-four years** ("until she was eighty-four," ESV, NIV). English Bible translations differ as to whether the number *eighty-four* refers to Anna's age at the time of her encounter with Jesus in the temple or to the duration of her widowhood. The latter view means that Anna would have been more than one hundred years old. In either view, she had lived as a widow for most of her life.

Finally, Luke reported the focus of Anna's life of service after she became a widow. Anna became a prayer-warrior. The phrases **did not leave the temple** and **serving God night and day** show a woman who was completely devoted to the Lord. Ordinarily, women were not allowed to stay in the temple complex overnight. Thus, Luke may have intended his readers to

understand that Anna was at the temple at every available opportunity. To put it in terms Christians might use today, Anna was “at church every time the doors were open.”

What was she doing at the temple? The Greek word translated **serving** can also be translated “worshiping.” Anna’s worship of God consisted of **fasting and prayers**. Like Simeon, Anna was expectantly waiting for God to usher in His kingdom. Her service was a commitment to intentional, serious prayer for God to fulfill His promises. Our churches also need such prayer warriors!

VERSE 38

At that very moment, she came up and began to thank God and to speak about him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

The phrase **at that very moment** (“in that instant,” KJV) can also be translated “at that very hour” (see ESV). Thus, Anna’s encounter with Joseph, Mary, and the Christ child may or may not have overlapped with Simeon’s encounter. Regardless, God also gave Anna insight as to the identity and significance of this Child. Given the size of the temple complex, it was astounding for her to be in the right place at the right time. In other words, Luke viewed Anna’s encounter with Jesus as a divinely arranged appointment, just like Simeon’s meeting had been.

Just as Simeon’s initial reaction to seeing Jesus was to praise God, Anna likewise could not help but **thank God**. If Anna said anything to Joseph and Mary, Luke did not record it. Instead, the Gospel writer stated that Anna began to speak to bystanders about the baby Jesus, especially to those **who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem**. The phrase *redemption of Jerusalem* parallels the description of Simeon as one waiting for the “consolation of Israel” (2:25). Both phrases refer to God’s kingdom breaking into the world through the Messiah. Two trustworthy witnesses, Simeon and Anna, proclaimed that God’s promise had been fulfilled in the coming of the Christ child. Thousands of years later, that is the same good news that we as believers celebrate every Christmas Day!

EXPLORE FURTHER

How does your anticipation of Christ’s second coming impact your worship, especially around Christmastime? How does the certainty of Christ’s return impact the way you live today? What do the examples of Simeon and Anna teach you about anticipating Christ’s return?

STRENGTHENED

God strengthens His church through His faithful servants.

During my ministry as an overseas missionary, our area planning team met annually to map out strategies for the next year. We usually had several important tasks that we wanted to focus on, but we also needed to exercise good stewardship of our personnel and finances. The purpose of the meetings was to prioritize the various goals, assign personnel, and budget our resources. Sometimes the discussions would grow intense as each missionary tried to make the case for different priorities.

One year, our planning team invited a group of missions volunteers from a church in the U.S. to sit in on the planning session. The group was scheduled to kick off their summer missions project later that day. Our team thought that letting the group experience a missions strategy session would be an encouragement to both them and us. At a break in the meeting, however, one of the young volunteers appeared quite sad. When someone asked what was wrong, the individual replied, “I didn’t think missionaries ever had disagreements.” We quickly assured the young worker that missionaries are not superheroes with halos but are saved sinners just like all believers. Missionaries can and do disagree at times over such things as strategy and assignments, and they can work through those disagreements as long as they keep the main focus on the Lord and His gospel mission.

At the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:6-29), representatives of the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch of Syria had reached a unified conclusion about the nature of salvation—by faith alone, not by works. However, Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement over how to proceed in the next stage of their mission work. Their disagreement was not about the mission but a personnel issue. Barnabas wanted to give John Mark a second chance to serve on the missionary team; Paul strongly disagreed.

This session looks at the manner in which these two Christ-honoring, gospel-proclaiming, Spirit-led believers worked through their disagreement in order to stay focused on the gospel mission. Paul and Barnabas modeled Christlike problem-solving for us and demonstrated how focusing on the mission can lead to strengthened efforts in discipleship and evangelism.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ACTS 15:36–16:15

During their first missionary journey (Acts 13:4–14:28), Paul and Barnabas met with increasing resistance to the gospel among Jews but with notable acceptance among Gentiles. This fact along with the Lord’s clear directive led Paul and Barnabas to focus their evangelistic strategy on reaching Gentiles (13:46–47). Meanwhile, some men who were purportedly from the Jerusalem church came to Antioch of Syria (Paul and Barnabas’s home base) and began to teach that Gentile converts must be circumcised according to the law in order to be truly saved.

Paul and Barnabas—now home from the first missionary journey—objected strenuously to the men’s legalistic doctrine (15:1–2). Such a teaching cut at the heart of the gospel of grace, which the two missionaries had proclaimed and so many Gentiles believed. Consequently, representatives of the church in Antioch, including Paul and Barnabas, traveled to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and church leaders. Their aim was to reach a once-and-for-all, Spirit-guided conclusion about the nature of salvation. That decision, which affirmed salvation by grace alone through faith alone without works of the law, was expressed in a letter that Luke preserved by including it in the Book of Acts (15:23–29).

The results of the council encouraged Paul and Barnabas, spurring them to plan a follow-up journey to check on the churches they had established on the first journey (15:36). This trip, reported by Luke in 15:36–18:22, would unfold in ways that Paul and Barnabas did not plan. The gospel would spread farther westward on this journey, marching relentlessly toward imperial Rome and beyond.

The context passage for this session focuses on early events of the second missionary journey. Acts 15:36–41 reports a sharp disagreement that arose between Paul and Barnabas concerning personnel that resulted in their forming two separate missionary teams. In 16:1–6, Paul and Silas, his new ministry partner, visited the churches previously established in the regions of Phrygia and Galatia. They recruited a young disciple named Timothy in Lystra. From there, the Holy Spirit directed Paul’s team to Troas (ancient Troy), a town situated on the coast of the Aegean Sea. At Troas, Paul saw a vision of a man in Macedonia who was pleading for the team to cross over the sea and help them (16:7–10). Convinced that God was using the vision to guide their steps, Paul and his team sailed across the sea and arrived in Philippi, an important city in the region. In Philippi, Paul led a businesswoman named Lydia to faith in Christ (16:11–15). Her conversion was the start of the Philippian church.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PARTING WAYS (Acts 15:36-39)

VERSE 36

After some time had passed, Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s go back and visit the brothers and sisters in every town where we have preached the word of the Lord and see how they’re doing.”

In the second half of Acts, Luke often signaled new sections in the narrative with general time references (Acts 16:36; 18:1; 21:15; 28:11). The words **after some time had passed** are just such a signal. How much actual time elapsed between 16:35 and 16:36 is unclear; it might have been two or three months. In any case, Paul began to think about the churches he and Barnabas started on their first missionary journey. He thought about all the towns where they had **preached the word of the Lord**—the gospel message of Christ’s atoning death and victorious resurrection.

Paul’s desire was to **go back and visit the brothers and sisters**, the many converts to the faith, and check on their spiritual progress. Perhaps Paul suspected that legalistic teachers like the ones who troubled the church in Antioch had already taken their false teachings to the regions of Phrygia and Galatia (see Gal. 1:6-7). He would certainly want to share the decisions of the Jerusalem council with these new Gentile believers, so Paul recommended to Barnabas that they embark on a second journey.

VERSES 37-38

Barnabas wanted to take along John Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take along this man who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone on with them to the work.

Barnabas agreed with the plan, seeing it as an opportunity to again involve his relative **John Mark** in evangelistic work. This is the same young man who had started with the team on the first missionary journey but for some reason had returned to his home in Jerusalem when the team reached Perga (13:5,13). Barnabas’s effort was in keeping with his generous character as a “son of encouragement” (4:36). Indeed, Barnabas had vouched for Paul (Saul) to the apostles in Jerusalem when most believers there still questioned whether Paul’s conversion was genuine (9:26-27).

Paul, however, was unwilling to risk a second disappointment. The Greek word rendered **insisted** (“thought best,” ESV; “think it wise,” NIV) refers to

carefully evaluating the suitability of something, especially an activity. In Paul's judgment, John Mark **had deserted** ("departed," KJV; "withdrawn from," ESV) both the missionary team and **the work** they had been set apart to do. The young man's premature departure left the team shorthanded for much of their journey. Paul did not want to risk that situation again.

VERSE 39

They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed off to Cyprus.

The Greek verb behind the noun rendered **sharp disagreement** literally means "to sharpen to a fine edge." Used figuratively, the term can mean "to provoke, irritate, arouse to anger." Acts 17:16, for example, uses the word in describing Paul's feelings of exasperation and deep distress over the level of idolatry in the city of Athens. On the other hand, Hebrews 10:24 employs the term in a positive way; the verse encourages believers to "provoke" (that is, stimulate, spur) one another to practice love and good works.

Some Bible scholars have wondered if the dispute between the two men might have involved something more than whether to trust John Mark again. These scholars point out that in Galatians 2:13 Paul called out Barnabas, Simon Peter (referred to as Cephas), and some other Jewish believers in Antioch for acting hypocritically by refusing to eat with Gentile believers after the legalistic troublemakers from Judea showed up in the city. The timing of the incident mentioned in Galatians is unclear, however. Furthermore, Luke gave no indication in Acts 15:39 that the issue was anything other than a disagreement about mission personnel. Barnabas focused on restoring a faltering believer to faithful service. Paul focused more on the purpose of the new journey, not wanting to risk having a team member desert again.

How did these two Christian servants solve their dilemma? They placed priority on the mission of taking the gospel to the nations. Paul's initial proposal had been for the team to revisit all of the towns they had evangelized on the first journey (15:36). This would include returning to the island of Cyprus, which happened to be Barnabas's native home (see Acts 4:36). Thus, Barnabas and Paul **parted company** ("departed asunder," KJV; "separated from each other," ESV) and formed two teams. Barnabas and John Mark **sailed off to Cyprus**. Paul recruited a new team and took an overland route around the Mediterranean coastline.

Luke did not mention Barnabas or John Mark again in the remainder of Acts. He kept the focus on Paul and the ways God used Paul to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. On the other hand, the apostle Paul mentioned both

Barnabas and Mark several times in his epistles (1 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 2:13; Col. 4:10). In fact, in 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul asked Timothy to come see him soon—the apostle was in prison in Rome—and to “bring Mark” along, because Mark was “useful to [Paul] in the ministry.” In other words, Paul affirmed in the end that Barnabas had been wise to restore John Mark to gospel ministry. As painful as the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas had been, they kept the gospel as their priority. As a result, the work they had been set apart to do continued and multiplied. New workers had been added, and a faltering disciple was restored. Today, may we commit to resolve such disagreements among believers with the same grace and wisdom!

EXPLORE FURTHER

In a situation like the one Paul and Barnabas faced concerning John Mark, do you lean more toward Paul’s point of view or Barnabas’s? Explain. What are some legitimate concerns of the other’s point of view? What are the benefits of resolving a disagreement as Paul and Barnabas did?

A NEW TEAM (Acts 15:40-41; 16:1-3)

VERSE 40

But Paul chose Silas and departed, after being commended by the brothers and sisters to the grace of the Lord.

With the team of Barnabas and John Mark headed to Cyprus, Paul was left with the task of enlisting a new team. His first new member was **Silas**. The name *Silas* is probably a Greek form of *Silvanus* [sil VAY nuhs], the name Paul used in his epistles for this missionary coworker (see 2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2:1). Luke, on the other hand, consistently used the name *Silas* in the Book of Acts.

Silas first appears in Acts as one of two trusted prophet-leaders from Jerusalem who accompanied Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch of Syria to deliver the letter from the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:22). Silas and his fellow prophet spent some time in Antioch encouraging and strengthening the believers before returning to Jerusalem (15:32). Paul undoubtedly felt that Silas would enable the missionary team to present a united front regarding the gospel and the nature of salvation to both Jewish and Gentile believers in the young churches they would soon visit. In addition, Silas, like Paul, held Roman citizenship. This would prove useful when the team moved into Greek cities such as Philippi (see 16:37).

Later, Silas appeared to have joined with Simon Peter in ministry, perhaps accompanying him to Rome. Luke never mentioned Silas's name again in Acts after Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth (18:5). On the other hand, Silas (Silvanus) appears in 1 Peter 5:12 as a trusted companion of Peter, serving him as a scribe or at least as the epistle's bearer. If this scenario is correct, Paul may have once again agreed to let a valued team member go in a new direction, thereby creating still more gospel teams.

Before that, however, Paul and Silas left Antioch **after being commended ... to the grace of the Lord**. Paul loved the church at Antioch and kept his evangelistic ministry tethered securely to it. In commanding the team, the church committed to support them, especially by praying for them. Paul would return to this church, as he had after the first missionary journey, and report on the ministry (18:22-23; compare 14:26-28).

VERSE 41

He traveled through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Although the pronoun **he** is singular, both Paul and Silas left Antioch—probably walking—and **traveled through Syria and Cilicia**. Rather than taking the sea route by way of the island of Cyprus, the team followed an overland route along the northeastern coastline of the Mediterranean Sea. Believers in the regions of *Syria and Cilicia* had been included along with those in Antioch of Syria in the salutation of the Jerusalem council's letter (15:23). Thus, Paul and Silas were able to instruct and encourage these **churches** on their way to the towns where Paul and Barnabas had evangelized during the first missionary journey.

CHAPTER 16, VERSE 1

Paul went on to Derbe and Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a believing Jewish woman, but his father was a Greek.

After leaving the regions of Syria and Cilicia, Paul and Silas likely traveled to the apostle's hometown of Tarsus and then turned northward, crossing the Tarsus Mountains through the famous Cilician Gates. On the western side of the mountain range, the team descended to the central plains and arrived first at **Derbe** and then at **Lystra**, two towns separated by about sixty miles.

Acts 14:21 reports that Paul "made many disciples" in Derbe on the first missionary journey. Presumably, the team spent some time there encouraging and instructing those believers. Luke's greater interest, however, seemed to be in reporting on the addition of a new team member in the next town, Lystra. Previously in Lystra, Paul healed a lame man, and the people mistook him and

Barnabas for gods (14:8-13). Eventually, however, some Jews from Antioch and Iconium came to Lystra, stirred up a mob, and stoned Paul, dragging him outside the city for dead (14:19). Paul boldly returned to the town with Silas, where they were introduced to **a disciple named Timothy**.

Timothy would come to be one of Paul's most trusted associates (see 1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:19-20). Luke described him first as a **disciple**, which means that Timothy either was converted under Paul's previous ministry in Lystra—in 1 Timothy 1:2 Paul referred to him as his “true son in the faith”—or was led to faith in Christ, perhaps by family members, after Paul left the town.

Second, Luke focused on Timothy's family background. Timothy's mother was **a believing Jewish woman**. In 2 Timothy 1:5, Paul gave her name as Eunice (a Greek name meaning “victorious”) and stated that both she and Timothy's grandmother, Lois, were women of sincere faith. It is probably fair to conclude that both women had become believers under Paul's preaching during the first missionary journey. However, they had taught Timothy the Scriptures from his childhood (2 Tim. 3:15).

Luke's description of Timothy's father was succinct: **his father was a Greek**. The Greek text simply states “father a Greek.” Bible students have speculated two things about Timothy's father based on this brief description. First, he may have been a pagan—that is, neither a Christian nor a proselyte of Judaism. In the least the father was a Gentile, and Paul knew that could hamper Timothy's acceptance in Jewish communities later on (see Acts 16:3). Second, Luke's use of the past tense in speaking of Timothy's father could suggest the man was already dead at that time. In any event, Timothy's father evidently had not objected to Eunice and Lois converting to Christianity or teaching Timothy the Scriptures.

VERSE 2

The brothers and sisters at Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him.

Finally, Luke spoke of Timothy's good reputation. Christians in both **Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him**. A literal rendering of the Greek phrase is “he was borne witness to.” The believers in these two cities were able to give glad testimony about Timothy's sterling Christian character.

Many Bible students assume that Lystra was Timothy's hometown because Paul met him there (16:1). The biblical text implies as much but does not say so explicitly. Timothy was well-known in both Lystra and Iconium, so either town would be a possibility. A few Bible students add Derbe to the list of possibilities. Whatever his hometown was, young Timothy had earned a good reputation among believers in the region.

VERSE 3

Paul wanted Timothy to go with him; so he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, since they all knew that his father was a Greek.

Paul immediately saw great potential in Timothy and **wanted Timothy to go with him.** Barnabas's decision to restore John Mark to gospel service would be validated by Mark's faithfulness in the end—the young man penned one of the Gospels! Similarly, Silas and Timothy's faithful and effective ministry would validate Paul's enlistment of the two men. God's sovereign activity continued to be evident as He placed His servants where He wanted them.

Paul's move to have Timothy **circumcised** before joining the missions team might seem puzzling at first. After all, the Jerusalem council had decided conclusively on the debate regarding circumcision and salvation: Gentiles were not required to be circumcised in order to be saved. Part of Paul's rationale for going on the second missionary journey was to make the churches of Syria and Cilicia aware of that decision (16:4). In addition, on one of Paul's early trips to Jerusalem, legalistic opponents raised a question about the salvation of Paul's assistant, Titus, a Gentile. In that situation, Paul had refused to require Titus to be circumcised "so that the truth of the gospel would be preserved" (Gal. 2:5). In this context, then, Paul's decision related to Timothy seems strange. When the details are examined more closely, however, Paul's decisions in each case are consistent.

Paul's insistence on not requiring Titus to be circumcised was in line with the decision of the Jerusalem council. To require Titus to be circumcised would have implied that something was missing from this Gentile believer's relationship with God. The church had made clear that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ alone (Acts 15:11).

Timothy, on the other hand, was the son of a blended marriage. His mother was Jewish, but it was common knowledge that **his father was a Greek.** Paul knew that many Jews in the towns where the team planned to go would likely consider Timothy to be an uncircumcised Jew and possibly would have viewed him as apostate. The decision of the Jerusalem council exempted Gentile converts from having to be circumcised for salvation, but it did not address the situation of a Jewish Christian who wished to be faithful to his religious heritage. The New Testament gives us no indication that Paul ever turned his back on his Jewish heritage. He continued to go to the Jewish synagogues and proclaim the gospel there first. Having Jewish listeners accuse a member of his team of being an apostate Jew could greatly hinder the team's opportunities to preach the gospel in synagogues.

For Paul, the issue with Timothy was never about his salvation but rather about his effectiveness in ministry. The decision to circumcise Timothy was in line with Paul's assertion that "to the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews" (1 Cor. 9:20). The Jerusalem council's decision did not close the door to the practice of Jewish traditions by Jewish Christians. Further, Paul did not abandon his appreciation for his Jewish heritage. At the urging of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, Paul later accompanied four men to the temple to complete a ritual of purification. The impetus for this trip to the temple was to refute the claim made by unbelieving Jews that Paul was teaching Jews to abandon the law and not to circumcise their children (Acts 21:20-24). By having Timothy circumcised, Paul refuted this accusation before it was made.

EXPLORE FURTHER

What might it look like for Christians today to practice Paul's witnessing principles as described in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 and summarized in the words "I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some"?

GROWTH SEEN (Acts 16:4-5)

VERSE 4

As they traveled through the towns, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem for the people to observe.

Luke did not clarify exactly where the missionary team visited **as they traveled through the towns**, but *the towns* must have included at least the four that Paul and Barnabas visited on their first missionary journey—Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe). These towns were in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia. If Paul wrote his Letter to the Galatians shortly before the Jerusalem council, as many Bible teachers believe, then that epistle must have been written to the churches in these same towns. The issues Paul dealt with in the Letter to the Galatians are similar to those addressed by the Jerusalem council. Thus, it would have been logical for Paul to share the council's **decisions** with these churches. Having Silas on the team as a representative of the Jerusalem church surely gave further assurance to these predominantly Gentile churches.

The Greek word translated *decisions* can refer to any formal statement of rules and regulations that are intended to be observed. Two of the five times

the Greek word occurs in the New Testament it is used of decrees from Caesar (Luke 2:1; Acts 17:7). The decisions that had been made **by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem** involved two major issues. First, circumcision was not required of Gentile believers for salvation. Second, Gentile believers were urged to live in accordance with the law's moral principles of abstaining from idolatry, sexual immorality, and the consumption of blood (Acts 15:28-29).

Luke made no mention of Paul's emphasizing the content of the letter in any other city beside the ones in the Galatian region. Neither did Paul ever mention the Jerusalem council's letter in any of his own epistles. Although Bible scholars have speculated as to why this is the case, we should be careful about relying too heavily on arguments from silence. Luke made it clear that the predominantly Gentile churches in Syria and Cilicia were expected to observe the conditions laid out in the council's letter. We can assume that Paul continued to respect and abide by this agreement.

VERSE 5

So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Luke noted two results from the missionary team's activities: discipleship and evangelism. The Greek word rendered **strengthened** is used only three times in the New Testament, once here and twice in the story of the lame man healed in the temple (3:7,16). The lame man's feet and ankles were made physically strong to the point that he was able to walk. Here the word describes the strengthening of a conviction or commitment. In other words, the believers in these young churches grew stronger **in the faith**. Not only did they grow in their understanding of Christian doctrine—especially the doctrines of salvation and holy living—but also in their confidence in and faithfulness to Christ.

A second result of the missionary team's visit was that churches **grew daily in numbers**. A deepening commitment to live by faith and in holiness leads to an increased commitment to share the gospel with others.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Is your church guided in its decisions by a doctrinal statement—a written set of primary beliefs that is made available to all the congregation? If so, how have you seen your church benefit practically by having a published doctrinal guide? How has it helped you personally as a believer?

A CHANGED FAMILY

God uses our influence to lead others to Him.

How we respond to adversity can reveal a lot about us. Too often my first reaction to trouble is to retreat inward like a tortoise pulling back into its shell. I want to shield myself from further danger or pain. When I do that, however, I am usually focusing too much on my fears and needs and too little on how God might transform my circumstances into opportunities for great service to Him.

I have known several people during my lifetime who responded to great adversity in a Christlike way. One of these people was a man who was diagnosed with cancer at an early age. He spent many hours of his life in medical clinics and hospitals being poked, prodded, and operated on. During those visits he tried to share his faith in Christ with every person he met. He told me once that he asked to change doctors when he discovered all the personnel in his current oncologist's clinic were believers. He wanted to go to a clinic where he would have opportunities to tell lost people about Jesus. Until the day this young man died, he viewed every day as another opportunity to share the gospel.

I had another friend who, like the previous young man, battled cancer. He had to travel out of state for treatment. When he did, I called him occasionally to check on his progress, always asking him, "How did it go today?" Invariably he would respond to my question by telling about the workers to whom he had witnessed or the fellow patients with whom he had prayed. If I then clarified that I was asking about his treatments, he would give a quick summary of the doctors' report and then ask me to pray over the phone for him to have more opportunities to share his faith. Both of my friends responded to adversity with great faith, not fear.

In today's session we will look at an incident in which Paul and Silas faced adversity in Philippi. Rather than focus inward, these two believers saw their trouble as an opportunity to praise God and proclaim His salvation.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ACTS 16:16–17:15

Having visited the churches established on the first missionary journey in the large central region of Galatia, Paul discerned that the Holy Spirit was directing his missionary team westward to the town of Troas on the Aegean Sea coast (16:6–8). While there, a vision of a man in Macedonia calling for help convinced Paul that God wanted them to take the gospel into key cities of the ancient kingdom of Greece—Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth (16:9–10). By obeying the Spirit’s guidance, Paul and his team grasped an opportunity to plant the gospel in what would become part of the modern continent of Europe.

In a change of perspective, at Troas the narrative in Acts switches to the first-person, plural pronoun “we” (see 16:10). This fact has convinced many Bible students that Luke joined Paul’s missionary team in Troas. We know from several of Paul’s letters that Luke accompanied the apostle at various times (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). It is reasonable to think that Paul would delight in adding a Christian doctor and historian to the team.

The team’s ministry in Philippi began with the conversion of Lydia, a businesswoman from Thyatira (16:13–15). Following this, Paul cast out an evil spirit from a slave girl who created an annoyance by following the team around the city for many days. However, the girl’s deliverance caused trouble for Paul and Silas from the slave girl’s owners. They used her to make money by telling fortunes. The owners succeeded in having Paul and Silas arrested, beaten, and jailed (16:16–24). (Session 8 features more about this incident.)

The missionaries’ imprisonment led to an amazing opportunity to lead a jailer and his family to faith in Christ (16:25–34). The next day, Paul and Silas used their Roman citizenship to clear their names and gain an apology from the Philippian city officials. In return, the officials urged Paul and Silas to leave town, which they did after meeting with the new believers at Lydia’s house (16:35–40).

From Philippi, Paul and Silas made their way to Thessalonica. Because this city had a Jewish population, the two went first to the synagogue. After speaking there on three Sabbath days, Paul welcomed many new believers to the faith—a few Jews and a large number of God-fearing Gentiles (17:1–4). Other Jews, however, became jealous of Paul and Silas’s evangelistic success, so they caused a riot that resulted in the missionaries’ having to leave town under cover of night (16:5–10). The team then stopped in Berea, where they found Jews who were eager to study the Scriptures and to hear the gospel. Many of them became believers. However, Jews from Thessalonica soon

arrived and opposed Paul to the point that he was forced to leave Berea as well and move on to Athens. Evidently Silas and Timothy (and perhaps Luke) were able to stay in Berea a while longer. In each situation, Paul and his team used every opportunity to share their faith in Christ (17:10-15).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE SITUATION (Acts 16:22-24)

Paul's time in Philippi centered on his interactions with three people: a businesswoman named Lydia who became a Christ-follower, an unnamed slave girl whom Paul delivered from an evil spirit, and a jail guard who went from the brink of suicide to salvation because of Paul and Silas's gospel witness while they were in jail. All of these interactions were connected. In particular, Paul and Silas were in jail as a result of angering the slave girl's owners. They made money off of her fortune-telling practices, and her deliverance from this evil spirit negatively impacted the owners' profits. Infuriated, they reacted swiftly and violently against Paul and Silas. They overpowered the two missionaries and dragged them to the marketplace to stand trial before the city's chief judges.

VERSE 22

The crowd joined in the attack against them, and the chief magistrates stripped off their clothes and ordered them to be beaten with rods.

The marketplace, or forum—the Greek term is *agora* [uh GOH ruh]—of a first-century city such as Philippi was a central public area that served as the religious, political, social, and economic hub. Archaeological work at the site of ancient Philippi unearthed a number of features in its marketplace area, including a raised stone platform that likely served as the place where city magistrates sat to hear legal cases. Workers found the ruins of a jail in an area adjacent to the marketplace. Because the court was in a public forum, crowds could easily gather and watch the proceedings.

The irate slaveowners brought three charges against Paul and Silas: (1) disturbing the peace, a serious offense in a Roman colony; (2) promoting illegal customs, perhaps a reference to drawing people away from the pagan religions approved by Rome; and (3) being Jews. This third charge likely was intended as an underhanded way to stir up latent prejudices among the judges if not also among onlookers. None of these charges were valid; nevertheless,

they had their intended effect. **The crowd joined in the attack** against Paul and Silas. The Greek word rendered *joined in the attack* (“rose up together,” KJV) occurs only here in the New Testament. It does not necessarily imply that onlookers engaged in mob violence. In the least, however, it reveals that the crowd shouted strong verbal taunts at the two missionaries. The crowd’s irrational jeers and shouts clouded the proceedings, highlighted by the judges’ swift decision to levy punishment.

The Greek word translated **chief magistrates** occurs in the New Testament only in Luke and Acts. In other Greek literature of the time, the term often referred to military leaders of various types, including law enforcement officials. In ancient Roman colonies such as Philippi, there would be at least two such officials in charge of maintaining order. In fact, the Roman (Latin) title for this position literally meant “two men.” People could frequently find these two judges in the marketplace. The judges had the power to decide cases on their own or to serve as public prosecutors in criminal cases.

Having given the accused missionaries no opportunity to defend themselves, the judges ordered that Paul and Silas should be **stripped** and **beaten with rods**. This form of flogging could be practiced as an interrogation technique, as a punishment in its own right, or as one part of a more extensive punishment. The testimony of the slave girl’s owners, who appear to have been men of wealth and position, and the enthusiasm of the crowd were evidence enough for the judges to render a verdict against two itinerant Jewish preachers.

Some readers might wonder how Timothy and (perhaps) Luke managed to escape the unjust suffering Paul and Silas endured in Philippi. We can only speculate since Luke did not mention the reason. Some Bible students propose that the two newest members of the team were not with Paul and Silas at the time of the incident. Others suggest that Timothy and Luke were not viewed as being directly involved in the slave girl’s healing or were not recognized as Jews. Whatever the case, Timothy and Luke surely learned from this incident that following Christ would not be danger-free.

VERSE 23

After they had severely flogged them, they threw them in jail, ordering the jailer to guard them carefully.

After the judges rendered their verdict, bailiffs, or *lictors* (the Greek term literally means “rod-bearers”) carried out the beatings and other punishments. Paul and Silas were **severely flogged**, a level of punishment that Roman citizens typically were not subjected to, especially in the absence of a more detailed investigation and trial. Interestingly, the two missionaries

did not appeal to their Roman citizenship, as they would do on the following day (see 16:37-38). Perhaps the reason for their silence at the trial was simply that Paul and Silas were never given a chance to speak.

After the flogging, the magistrates ordered that the two missionaries be put **in jail**. Further, they commanded **the jailer to guard** the prisoners **carefully** (“safely,” KJV, ESV). The Greek word rendered *carefully* can also be translated “safely” or “securely.” In light of the jailer’s actions in 16:24, the judges’ orders had to do with securing the prisoners, not keeping them safe from a possible lynch mob. The judges wanted to make sure these two troublemaking Jews could not escape or be rescued by their friends.

From the perspective of Luke’s narrative in Acts, the judges’ orders only heightened a sense of anticipation for the reader of Scripture. Could the same Lord who delivered a slave girl from a life of spiritual (and physical) bondage now deliver Paul and Silas from a secure jail cell? Could the same gospel that captured the heart of a successful businesswoman named Lydia (16:14) also transform a hardened prison guard into a follower of Christ? Time would tell.

Luke did not report the jailer’s name or background. Nevertheless, Bible students have inferred various ideas about the man’s social status based on the text. Some suggest, for example, that the jailer was a public slave—owned by the city and assigned the thankless job of guarding prisoners. Others propose that the man may have been a retired Roman soldier who settled in Philippi to work and raise a family after his military service had ended. He might even have been a person of some measure of prosperity. A later mention of “his entire household” (16:34) could refer not only to family members but also to his having servants of his own.

VERSE 24

Receiving such an order, he put them into the inner prison and secured their feet in the stocks.

The jailer took two measures to carry out the magistrates’ demand for securing the prisoners. First, **he put them into the inner prison**. This portion of the jail would have been similar to a dungeon or some other maximum-security cell. Second, the jailer **secured** (“fastened,” ESV, NIV) the prisoners’ **feet in the stocks**. The Greek word translated *stocks* literally means “wood” or “tree.” It is the same word used elsewhere in Acts to refer to the cross on which Jesus was crucified (5:30; 10:39; 13:29). The term could also refer to a carved or shaped wooden object. Wooden stocks gave an extra measure of security in that they limited prisoners’ mobility. Jailers could use them to stretch prisoners into torturous positions. For good measure, officials often fastened stocks to the prison wall by a chain.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Persecution” on page 1248 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What forms of persecution do believers in the United States face today? How can believers in the United States help and support Christians in places where they face arrest, physical violence, and even martyrdom?

THE OPPORTUNITY (Acts 16:25–28)

VERSE 25

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

The phrase **about midnight** likely indicates that the two beaten and bound missionaries had been in jail for more than twelve hours. City magistrates typically heard cases in the marketplace during the morning hours to avoid the searing afternoon heat. Thus, Paul and Silas’s trial probably happened sometime before noon, and the beatings were administered soon thereafter.

Given the two missionaries’ lingering pain from the whippings and additional suffering from sitting immobile for hours in the stocks, sleep would have been difficult at best. Yet, Paul and Silas used their dreadful situation as an opportunity to worship. They **were praying and singing hymns to God**. The phrase *singing hymns* is actually the rendering of a single Greek term from which we get our English word *hymn*. It usually refers to songs of praise or celebration. No amount of injustice, intimidation, or incarceration could keep Paul and Silas from praising their Lord and Savior.

The two missionaries’ joyful praise also caught the attention of other **prisoners**. The Greek word translated **listening**, found only here in the New Testament, means “to listen attentively, to overhear.” Whether these prisoners were aware of Paul and Silas’s circumstances is unclear. They were surely amazed, however, by the two men’s response to adversity. Paul and Silas had a captive audience for their gospel testimony in song!

VERSE 26

Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains came loose.

The situation within the prison changed drastically when a **violent earthquake** (“great earthquake,” KJV, ESV) struck. The region was (and is) prone to quakes and tremors, but the timing of this quake was no coincidence. It did not destroy the building or harm those inside, but it was strong enough to rattle the jail’s **foundations** and shake open **all the doors**. Moreover, all the prisoners’ **chains came loose**. The Greek word rendered *chains* (“bands,” KJV; “bonds,” ESV) is a general term that can refer to anything that restrains or hinders a person, either literally or figuratively. Either way, the point was clear: the prisoners could now escape if they chose to do so.

VERSE 27

When the jailer woke up and saw the doors of the prison standing open, he drew his sword and was going to kill himself, since he thought the prisoners had escaped.

The prison complex at Philippi probably included living quarters—if not an adjacent house—where the jailer and his family lived. When the earthquake woke him, the jailer jumped up immediately to check on his prisoners. Through the darkness, compounded by dust and debris from the quake, he saw a terrifying sight: **the doors of the prison were standing open**. This could only mean that all **the prisoners had escaped**.

Fearing the worst, the jailer moved immediately to take his own life. This drastic measure likely was based on one of two possible conclusions. First, the jailer knew that his life was on the line regarding his job. That is, if prisoners escaped, then the jailer’s own life would be forfeited as punishment (compare Acts 12:18-19). Second, if the jailer was indeed a former Roman soldier, then the loss of prisoners under his charge could have brought dishonor upon him and his family. The only way to avoid dishonor for his family was to **kill himself**—or so he mistakenly thought.

VERSE 28

But Paul called out in a loud voice, “Don’t harm yourself, because we’re all here!”

As was his style, Luke concisely reported the action of this event, omitting details we might be curious about and keeping the narrative moving toward its main destination. For example, we might wonder how Paul could have known of the jailer’s self-destructive intent. Did the jailer come inside but not see that the prisoners were still there? Could Paul see him from within the inner prison because all the doors were open? These details were secondary to the fact that Paul quickly **called out in a loud voice** and urged the jailer

not to harm himself. None of the prisoners had escaped. All of them were still in their cells.

Luke again did not see the need to explain why the prisoners stayed in their cells. Perhaps the jailer responded so quickly after the earthquake that the prisoners, still in shock from the earthquake, had no time to flee. Or maybe Paul and Silas convinced the other prisoners to stay. Whatever the reason, Paul's quick action saved the jailer's life in more ways than one. That is precisely the point Luke wanted his readers to understand.

EXPLORE FURTHER

What are some prayers and hymns that you turn to during difficult circumstances? What does it say about Paul's faith that he was concerned about the jailer's well-being during a time of crisis? How might Paul's example encourage you to speak and act during crises?

THE CONVERSION (Acts 16:29-32)

VERSE 29

The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.

This verse reveals that darkness played a role in the jailer's panicked assumption that his prisoners had escaped. On hearing Paul's voice and reassuring words, the jailer quickly **called for lights**. The Greek word rendered *lights* (*photon*) refers to the light itself rather than to a light source, which presumably were oil lamps or torches. More significantly, the jailer's darkness was about to be filled with light in a way he did not expect.

The earthquake had shaken the foundations of the jail so that the doors flew open. Paul's compassion and word of assurance shook the jailer himself, opening the man's heart to the gospel. He **rushed in** ("sprang in," KJV) **and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas**. Paul realized this was not a case of misplaced worship as had occurred previously at Lystra (14:11-13). Rather, the jailer showed his deep respect for two men who obviously had a salvation he didn't have—but desperately wanted.

VERSE 30

He escorted them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

The jailer evidently freed Paul and Silas from the stocks and brought them out

of the inner prison. At some point, the jailer asked the two missionaries the central question of the Book of Acts: **What must I do to be saved?** Was the man inquiring about being rescued from physical danger (future earthquakes, repercussions from failing to do his job) or about being saved from sin? For Luke, the writer of Acts, such a debate was irrelevant. Even if the jailer asked his question only in the context of his pagan background, he asked the right question to two Christians who then gave him the right answer.

VERSES 31-32

They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” And they spoke the word of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house.

Given the jailer's pagan background, he may have expected information about a sacrifice to be made or a ritual to be performed. Paul and Silas's reply was exquisitely simple: **believe in the Lord Jesus.** No animal sacrifice. No elaborate ritual. Just simple, genuine, full-hearted faith.

Some Bible students have wondered if the words **and your household** in verse 31 suggest a form of corporate salvation. It is true that in some cultures of the ancient world, family solidarity was a deeply rooted feature. If the father became a Christian the entire family became Christians. On the other hand, verse 32 makes it clear that Paul and Silas explained **the word of the Lord** not just to the jailer but also to **everyone in his house.** The emphasis of the entire Book of Acts is that the gospel is for all people—all nations, all ethnic groups, all backgrounds, and all members of a family.

Luke did not record at what point the jailer's household joined the conversation. Family members might have joined the jailer outside in the aftermath of the earthquake. Otherwise, the jailer likely sent for his family to come when Paul and Silas announced that salvation was available not only to him but also to his household.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Think of a time when you were treated unfairly. How did you respond to the situation? Did you focus on the unfairness of what happened to you or did you look for an opportunity to witness to God's grace? Paul and Silas did not allow their prior treatment at the hands of the Philippian officials to affect their witness to the jailer and his family. How can we avoid missing opportunities to witness in the midst of personal distress or crisis circumstances?

THE TRANSFORMATION (Acts 16:33-34)

VERSE 33

He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away he and all his family were baptized.

If the Philippian jailer exhibited evil character before the earthquake, he was a radically different man now. He became aware, perhaps for the first time, of Paul and Silas's physical needs. His first task was to treat the missionaries' **wounds** ("stripes," KJV). The jailer's changed attitude toward Paul and Silas was evidence that God had transformed the man's heart.

Paul and Silas had the blood and grime of persecution washed from their physical wounds. But the jailer **and all his family** experienced the washing away of their sins through faith in Jesus Christ! The next step was clear: they **were baptized**. Luke did not report the location of their baptisms. His point was that nothing stood in the way of this Gentile family's salvation.

VERSE 34

He brought them into his house, set a meal before them, and rejoiced because he had come to believe in God with his entire household.

The jailer welcomed Paul and Silas **into his house** and **set a meal before them**. Two details related to this meal are significant. First, the jailer's attitude and actions toward Paul and Silas had taken a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. Showing hospitality to these prisoners could put him and his family in jeopardy from the angry citizens and magistrates of Philippi. Second, Paul and Silas showed no hesitation about eating a meal and enjoying close fellowship with these new Gentile believers. They were all part of God's redeemed family.

The scene in the jailer's house was one of great joy. An entire family **had come to believe in God**. The gospel cannot be bound by prison bars or difficult circumstances. As Paul later wrote to believers in Rome, "It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

EXPLORE FURTHER

In what ways did your parents or other family members contribute to your knowledge of Christ? To your early spiritual growth? How have you seen your church support parents' roles in their children's spiritual growth?

THE UNKNOWN KNOWN

Through faith in Christ, sinful human beings can know the one true God.

A slowly moving creek wandered through nearby trees. A cobblestone path ran beside the creek, and shops lined the path. I was on a visit to an overseas country and had decided to take an early morning stroll through the marketplace. The area was just starting to come to life with shop owners opening their doors and moving merchandise outside. As I walked along the cobblestone path, one merchant in particular caught my eye. He had already arranged his wares to sell, but he hadn't begun calling out to the day's first potential buyers. Instead, he was kneeling in the rear of his shop with his hands folded together. In front of him stood a bowl of fruit and a vase with sticks of burning incense. I watched the scene for a few moments, not understanding the man's words but wondering if he was trying to pacify unseen spirits or seeking to gain the favor of dead ancestors.

The apostle Paul once found himself in a similar situation. He had arrived in Athens, the birthplace of ancient Greek culture. Altars to many pagan deities lined the roadway leading to the marketplace. As he stopped before an altar devoted to an unknown God, Paul saw an opportunity to tell the Athenians about the one true God and the gospel of salvation.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ACTS 17:16–18:23

The background for this session is the second half of Paul's second missionary journey. Paul, Silas, and Timothy (and perhaps Luke, the writer of Acts) had boarded a ship at Troas, sailing across the northern edge of the Aegean Sea to Philippi (16:11-12). By doing so, the team brought the gospel into Europe.

They evangelized in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. In each of these cities the team experienced positive responses to the gospel but also persecution and harassment from non-believers. Hostile opposition in Berea forced Paul to leave town for his safety. He moved on to Athens, leaving Timothy and Silas in Berea for a time to strengthen the work there.

The golden age of Athens had peaked in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. While its political influence as the cradle of democracy had faded by the time Paul arrived in the first century AD, the city was still an important world center for philosophy, art, and literature. In 17:16, Luke reported that Paul was “deeply distressed” over the pervasive idolatry in Athens. The city had a synagogue, however, so Paul followed his typical practice of starting there with his proclamation of the gospel (17:17). He extended his ministry into the marketplace as well. There he came in contact with some Greek philosophers—in particular, followers of two fourth-century BC teachers: Epicurus [EP ih KYOQR uhs], who taught that pleasure was the chief goal of human life, and Zeno [ZEE noh], whose Stoic teachings called for an indifference to pain and suffering while pursuing only rational thought and self-sufficiency. Paul was invited to bring his gospel teaching to the famous Areopagus (17:18-21). His address to the philosophers was a model in witnessing, even though response to the gospel was mixed (17:22-34).

Paul soon left Athens and moved fifty-five miles west to the city of Corinth (18:1). There Paul met and began working with Aquila [AK wih luh] and Priscilla, a Jewish couple who had fled from Rome and come to Corinth to work as tent makers (18:2-3). At some point Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Corinth, enabling the apostle to focus solely on preaching (18:5). Eventually, however, many of the Jewish leaders in the city turned against Paul, forcing him to quit preaching in the synagogue and move to a house (18:6-11). Later, the hostile Jews brought a legal case against Paul, but it did not end as they planned (18:12-17). Paul preached in Corinth for at least a year and a half before moving to Ephesus. Upon departing Ephesus, he traveled first to Jerusalem and then returned to Antioch of Syria (18:18-23).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

Paul’s address before the philosophers in Athens is one of several extended speeches the apostle delivered and that Luke recorded in Acts (see 13:16-41; 17:22-31; 20:18-35; 22:1-21; 24:10-21; 26:1-23). In his Athens address, Paul sought to build theological bridges to his Gentile audience, all with the purpose of convincing skeptics of the gospel’s truth and urgency. He began by calling attention to the city’s altar devoted to an unknown God.

UNKNOWN GOD (Acts 17:22-23)

VERSE 22

Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect.

The word **Areopagus** [ehr ih AHP uh guhs] (“Mars’ hill,” KJV) is a transliteration (substituting English letters for Greek letters) of a compound Greek term that means “Ares’s hill.” Ares [EHR eez] was the Greek god of war, the equivalent of the Roman god Mars. The *Areopagus* was an outcropping of rock that rose over three hundred and fifty feet above the city’s marketplace.

In the glory days of Athens, the city’s ruling council met atop the rocky hill to judge criminal cases and administer elections. In Paul’s day, the duties of the council were more administrative, including oversight of issues related to education and religion. At some point, the council moved its meeting to a large portico on the northwest side of the marketplace. Even after the move, however, the name *Areopagus* continued to refer to both the hill and the ruling council. In any event, the phrase **stood in the middle of** surely includes the understanding that Paul addressed a group of people.

Paul’s words “**People of Athens**” raise a question as to what type of meeting the Athenians had summoned Paul. On one hand, it may have been a casual, informational meeting arranged by the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers whom Paul met in the marketplace (17:18). The audience may have consisted of all interested citizens who wanted to understand more clearly the ideas Paul was preaching. After all, the Athenians had a reputation for spending “their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new” (17:21).

On the other hand, this may have been a more formal meeting of the city council to whom Paul would have to answer for preaching about new and strange gods. The Greek word used in 17:19 to describe the action taken by the philosophers—“they took [Paul]”—is the same term that Luke used in describing Paul’s being seized by force in Philippi to be brought before that city’s authorities (16:19). Moreover, the philosophers viewed Paul with disdain, calling him an “ignorant showoff” (17:18; literally, a “seed picker”). Whether the meeting was formal or informal, the listeners evidently consisted of a mixture of council members, philosophers, and others—both men and women (see 17:34).

The tone of Paul’s observation that the Athenians were **extremely religious** (“too superstitious,” KJV; “very religious,” ESV, NIV) is unclear. Was Paul building a bridge by taking note of the people’s devotion to spiritual matters? Or was he confronting their over-the-top idolatry and superstition? In any case, he soon made clear to the people that the multitude of idols in their city was not a good thing.

VERSE 23

For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed: ‘To an Unknown God.’ Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

Paul revealed that his conclusion regarding the Athenians' religiosity was based on personal observations. He had walked around the city and observed the many **objects of their worship**. Those *objects* no doubt included all of the major temples as well as the many smaller shrines, altars, and statues of pagan deities found throughout the city. Further, Paul had talked with unbelievers daily in the marketplace, no doubt listening to their stories and then telling them the good news about Jesus (17:17-18).

One **altar** in particular had caught Paul's attention. It was dedicated to **an Unknown God**. A few secular Greek writers from the New Testament era also noted that various altars in Athens were dedicated to unknown gods. One view is that the Athenians wanted to ensure that no gods were overlooked in their devotion, thus leaving them open to that god's wrath. Another view is that an altar might have lost its original inscription over time, and those who repaired it were unsure as to which deity it had once been devoted. Thus, the repairers acknowledged their ignorance on the new inscription. For Paul, however, the inscription became a wonderful opening to introduce the people of Athens to the one true God.

The words **what you worship in ignorance** should not be understood to mean that Paul suggested the Athenians (or anyone else for that matter) were somehow worshiping the one true God by paying homage to an idol. In reality, the Athenians' spiritual ignorance led to their worshiping an object that was no god at all. However, by confronting the people of Athens honestly and graciously, Paul was then able to tell his hearers about that one true God who created everything and who cannot be equated with human-made images or natural objects.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Idol" on page 788 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you define idolatry to someone in today's world? Why do we seem so prone to worship idols instead of worshiping the one true God? What is at the root of idolatry according to Colossians 3:5?

THE KNOWN CREATOR (Acts 17:24-29)

VERSE 24

The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands.

The first claim Paul made about God was that He is the Creator of all things. The Old Testament opens with the declaration that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Psalm 95:5 declares that God’s creative activity is a reason for joyous praise and triumphant singing.

The second truth Paul emphasized was that the one true God is the **Lord of heaven and earth**. Through the prophet Isaiah, God reminded the Persian emperor Cyrus, “I made the earth, and created humans on it. It was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded everything in them” (Isa. 45:12). God is sovereign over all His creation.

Based on these two fundamental truths about God, Paul made two applications. First, since God stands above all creation as the Creator, we are foolish to think He can be confined in **shrines made by** [human] hands. At the dedication of the Jerusalem temple, King Solomon admitted that “even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain you, much less this temple I have built” (1 Kings 8:27). In one of the most extensive sermons in the Book of Acts, the deacon Stephen urged the temple priests of his day to remember that “the Most High does not dwell in sanctuaries made with hands” (Acts 7:48). Paul emphasized this same truth in a city where its citizens could not walk any direction without seeing multiple temples, shrines, and idols purported to be the dwelling places of the various gods. One deity was confined to one temple; another deity could only be approached in the shrine down the street. Ironically, some of the Greek philosophers in Athens likely would have agreed with Paul to that extent—that people were foolish to think their gods lived in earthly structures. However, Paul would soon differentiate sharply between biblical truth and pagan philosophy.

VERSE 25

Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.

Paul’s second application was that we are foolish to think God has to depend on human beings for anything. As the sovereign Lord, God needs nothing from us. On the contrary, He is the One who **gives everyone life and breath and all things**. The phrase *life and breath* brings to mind the word-portrait of God’s breathing into the first human the very breath of life (Gen. 2:7).

In the New Testament, the Greek word rendered **served** often refers to physical healing. However, in the Septuagint [sep TOO uh jint] (an ancient translation of the Old Testament into Greek), the Greek term frequently describes someone who attends to a superior, such as a priest who serves God in the temple by offering sacrifices or a servant who attends to a king.

Paul's argument in Athens was grounded in the biblical understanding of the one true God. Again, though, many of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers present that day likely would have agreed with Paul's basic critique to this point. One of Athens's best-known poets from the fifth century BC made a similar argument that any God who was truly Deity would have need of nothing. Thus, while Paul continued to speak to his audience in ways they understood, the apostle's belief in the one true God was a far cry from the pantheism (everything as divine) of Greek philosophy.

VERSE 26

From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live.

Acts 17:26-27 is comprised of one long sentence in the Greek text. The main idea of the sentence is that God **has made every nationality**. In other words, all people groups derive from one and the same God. The world's nations were not created by different national deities but rather by one sovereign Creator. Further, the many diverse people groups across the earth all share a single, common ancestor. The words **from one man** can be literally translated "out of one." The word rendered *one* is masculine; therefore, many English-language Bibles supply the word *man*, concluding that Paul was referring to the Genesis creation account of Adam, the first man (and human) God made (Gen. 2:7). A few Greek manuscripts of Acts have the word *blood* (see KJV) rather than *man*, but the meaning is the same. The one true God created one man and one woman in the beginning, and every *nationality* in existence shares this common origin.

Paul's argument for the common ancestry of all humans may have been the first area where he distinguished clearly between biblical truth and Greek philosophy. A popular belief among Athenians was that they had sprung from the soil of their native land. As such, many Greeks considered themselves superior to other people groups, whom they thought of as barbarian. Similarly, many Jews in Paul's day looked down on all Gentiles. The unknown God whom Paul proclaimed in the gospel was both the Maker and Redeemer of all people groups. There was (and is) no place in the gospel for spiritual arrogance or favoritism.

Two purpose clauses expand on the main idea that God *made every nationality*. These two clauses explain what God had in mind when He commanded the first human couple to multiply and fill the earth with generations of descendants (see Gen. 1:28). The first purpose was that human beings in all their diversity would **live over** (“inhabit,” NIV) **the whole earth** God had created for them. The terms **appointed times** and **boundaries** probably refers to the historical periods and national borders of nations. God is the One who decides when nations rise to prominence, when they fade away, and how far their borders reach. No nation, ancient or modern, determines its own path apart from God’s sovereign will.

VERSE 27

He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

The second purpose the Creator had in mind was that “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9) **might seek God** and **reach out and find him**. Adam and Eve’s fall into sin corrupted this purpose. Rather than seeking God to worship Him and have fellowship with Him, the sinful couple hid from Him in shame (Gen. 3:8). Since then, every descendant of Adam and Eve has inherited that sinful nature. The idea of seeking God is a common theme in the Old Testament, especially in the context of God’s calling His covenant people to seek Him. Paul was building a theological foundation for his upcoming presentation of the gospel.

The Greek word rendered *reach out* basically means “to touch” or “to handle.” However, the word also can refer to groping about with uncertainty as to whether a sought-for object might be found. The Greek philosophers believed that people could reach the divine through the proper development of human reason. For Paul, however, all human efforts were a hopeless groping in the darkness. Salvation could come only through God’s revelation of Himself in Christ. God would have to seek us before we could seek Him.

Finally, Paul assured his audience that the one true God was not hiding from His creation. In fact, **he is not far from each one of us**. Moses had told the Israelites, “For what great nation is there that has a god near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call to him?” (Deut. 4:7). And Psalm 145:8 says “the Lord is near all who call out to him, all who call out to him with integrity.”

VERSE 28

For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also his offspring.’

When speaking in a synagogue, Paul often used quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures. In speaking to a Greek audience in Athens, however, the apostle included an appropriate illustration from Greek writings. Bible commentators differ as to whether all of verse 28 is quoted from Greek sources or only the second part of the verse. In my judgment, the words **in him we live and move and have our being** are not a quotation but rather Paul's summary of a traditional Greek understanding about the relationship between the human and the divine. The Stoic philosophers present that day would have thought of life, movement, and existence in a pantheistic sense. Paul used the words, however, to anchor all of human existence to the one true God who created everything.

The second part of verse 28 is probably a quotation from the third-century BC Greek poet Aratus [AR uh tuhs]. Some Bible scholars suggest that the quotation originally came from an even earlier poem written by a fourth-century BC philosopher named Cleanthes [clee AN theez]. If this suggestion is correct, it may explain why Paul used the phrase **some of your own poets**. Paul was not implying by the use of this quotation that he believed in the existence of Greek gods. He had already made the point that only one true God existed. Rather, Paul used the quotation to reinforce the truth that all people share a common origin: the one true God created all of us. Moreover, we are all made in the image of this one true God. To know Him is to know the truth about ourselves.

VERSE 29

Since we are God's offspring then, we shouldn't think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination.

Being the **offspring** of God, in Paul's understanding, meant that people are created in God's image, not vice versa. Consequently, we are foolish to **think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone**. No **image fashioned by human art and imagination** ("an image made by human design and skill," NIV) can do justice to the God who created everything. Paul's argument here was in line with the Old Testament's consistent condemnation of idol worship. The prophet Isaiah pointed out the folly of burning half a tree to cook one's meal and then carving an idol to worship from the other half (Isa. 44:15-18). Some Greek philosophers might have agreed in theory with Paul's condemnation of idol worship, but in practice they accommodated the rampant idol worship in Athens. People's response to God's nearness was to worship created things rather than the One who had created them. Athens was full of idols, but the Athenians were ignorant regarding the one true God.

JUDGMENT BY THE SON (Acts 17:30-31)

VERSE 30

Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent,

Paul returned to the idea with which he began his address—the notion of the people's **ignorance** of God (Acts 17:23). The Greek word translated **overlooked** is found only here in the New Testament and means “to purposefully pay no attention to.” Paul had made a similar point in Lystra when he told those gathered that God had “allowed all the nations to go their own way” (14:16). Paul emphasized that with Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection a new age had dawned. Just as Jesus called for repentance at the beginning of His ministry, Paul likewise proclaimed that **God commands all people everywhere to repent.** The gospel was for both Jews and Gentiles. The command to repent included the Athenians who were mired in idolatry and human-based philosophies. They needed to repent of their wrong beliefs and turn to the one God who could save them. So must we do today as well!

VERSE 31

because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

The urgency of the situation was seen in the fact that God had appointed **a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness.** The Greek word translated *world* refers to the earth as an inhabited area and by extension to all inhabitants of the earth. Because God created and populated the world, His judgment is not regional but extends to all people everywhere.

The agent of God's judgment will be **the man he has appointed.** Here Paul may have been echoing the language of Daniel 7:13-14. People will be held accountable on that day for their response to Jesus the Messiah.

God's proof of His power and authority to judge the world was demonstrated in the resurrection of Christ. The Greek philosophers in the marketplace had been astounded by Paul's message concerning “the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18). Now Paul explained that God's desire for people to seek Him was the reason for Christ's death and resurrection.

EXPLORE FURTHER

What is the urgency for people to repent and believe in Christ today?

SPLIT DECISION (Acts 17:32-34)

VERSES 32-33

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, “We’d like to hear from you again about this.” So Paul left their presence.

Paul’s sermon ended with a reference to Jesus’ **resurrection**. Because the Greek word for *resurrection* is feminine, a previous audience in Athens seems to have thought that Paul was introducing two deities like their own pagan gods—a male deity (Jesus) and his female counterpart (Resurrection). In this sermon, Paul made clear that he was speaking of people being raised to life after death. This clarity led some hearers to immediately **ridicule** Paul. The Greek word rendered *ridicule* means “to make fun of maliciously.” It was often expressed through mockery or jeering. A second group remained skeptical about Paul’s message, yet they expressed a willingness **to hear from** Paul **again**. Nevertheless, Paul **left their presence**.

VERSE 34

However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

A number of people were convinced by Paul’s message. They **joined him and believed**. One of those converts, **Dionysius** [DIGH oh NISH ih uhs] was a member of the city’s ruling council. Eusebius [yoo SEE bih uhs], an early church historian, suggested that Dionysius became the first pastor of the church in Athens.

A second convert was **a woman named Damaris** [DAM uh riss]. In addition, there were **others**—Luke left the number inexact—who became believers. Because verse 34 appears to be a summary, the converts listed by Luke may include responses both to the sermon Paul had just delivered and his earlier preaching in the synagogue and marketplace. In any event, the preaching of the gospel had borne fruit yet again.

EXPLORE FURTHER

What opportunities have you had to engage in conversations with skeptical unbelievers about the gospel? What part of Paul’s conversations with the people of Athens motivates you to have future gospel conversations with skeptical unbelievers?

VALUE ALL

Christ values every person, so we should not exploit or disregard others.

Human trafficking is a worldwide travesty that exists in the shadows. It operates undetected and unnoticed by most people in the world. Yet experts estimate that the current number of victims slaving away in forced labor at around twenty-one million people worldwide. Millions of these victims are young girls and women being forced to work as prostitutes in the illegal sex trade. A recent news report revealed that in just one major U.S. city the illegal sex industry netted almost two-hundred and ninety million dollars annually. Data such as this is important to know because it highlights the extent of the disaster and the urgent need for justice. However, statistics can sometimes leave us feeling overwhelmed or helpless. We're tempted to ignore the problem as long as it doesn't affect us personally, or we assume that others have all the responsibility to take a stand and act.

Several years ago, a group of Christian women in New Orleans took a different approach to the issue of sex trafficking. These women from various churches began to meet and pray fervently for women involved in the adult entertainment industry in the city. The group began prayer-walking during the early hours of the morning in the areas where this type of activity happened. God gave these Christian women opportunities to interact with the club owners, and soon the group was bringing food to the workers, distributing Bibles and other material, and setting up times to meet with the workers away from the clubs. Over time, some of the workers became reconciled with family members and returned home. Others became believers, left the clubs, and connected with local churches.

These committed Christian women made a difference in the lives of other women who were being used as objects rather than being valued as people created in God's image. When we as believers understand the value that God places on every human being, when we learn to see as God sees the inestimable worth in each person, then we will be moved to find those marginalized and devalued people in our sphere of influence and work to help them find their place in God's family through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

This session focuses on two passages of Scripture: Acts 16:16-19, which was included as part of the background text for Session 6, and Psalm 139:13-16. The reason for adding an Old Testament text into this session is to emphasize the sanctity of human life. Both of these Scripture passages highlight the calling we have as followers of Christ to value every person as God does. This calling demands that we reject attitudes and human systems that exploit or devalue vulnerable human beings, whether preborn children in the womb, people with disabilities, the powerless, or the elderly.

ACTS 16:16-19; PSALM 139

The event described in Acts 16:16-19 occurred while Paul and his team were in Philippi during the second missionary journey. In Luke's record, the incident with the slave girl happened after the conversion of Lydia, a businesswoman from Thyatira who had a home in Philippi and was already a God-fearer (16:14,40). Further, the incident with the slave girl both preceded and precipitated an event in which Paul and Silas, while in jail, led their jailer and his family to faith in Christ after an earthquake struck the city (16:20-34).

The slave girl's story thus provides a narrative link to show how the gospel successfully took root in Philippi (Lydia's conversion) but also provoked hostility from those under the devil's control—the enemies of the gospel. Nevertheless, this slave girl's liberation from physical and spiritual bondage shouldn't be skipped over lightly simply because the account is brief. The story compels us to think deeply and seriously about vulnerable individuals, both in Paul's day and ours, who are treated merely as objects to exploit rather than valued as precious human beings made in God's image.

Psalm 139 is a psalm attributed to King David of Israel, in which David extolled the Lord as the all-knowing, ever-present, and wonderful Maker of humankind. The psalm is comprised of at least four sections. In the first section (139:1-6), David reflected on God's complete knowledge of him and confessed his inability to grasp all that God knows. In verses 7-12, the second section, David affirmed there was nowhere that he (or anyone) could go to escape God's presence. This truth was reassuring in that David knew the Lord would always be there to guide and help him.

In section three, covering verses 13-18 (some Bible students see two sections in these verses), David reflected on God's remarkable role as his Maker—from God's knitting together his intricate body in his mother's womb to the planning out of David's entire lifespan before his first day of

life began. This is the section of verses from which our second passage for this session is drawn. Verses 13-16 vividly remind us of how valuable every human being is in God's eyes.

Section four of the psalm (139:19-24) shifts dramatically in tone. The psalmist declared his hatred for all of God's enemies. While the section's harsh language might make us uncomfortable today, we need to understand that God's people in David's day were surrounded by nations that constantly plotted to destroy them. David issued a call to stand with God against evil forces in the world that devalue human life and attempt to thwart God's divine purposes. Significantly, the psalm ends with a prayer that God would search the psalmist's heart and expose any offensive attitude therein. As believers, we need to be careful about standing against others' wicked actions while never examining our own hearts for sin (1 Cor. 10:12).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

FREEDOM GAINED (Acts 16:16-18)

VERSE 16

Once, as we were on our way to prayer, a slave girl met us who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She made a large profit for her owners by fortune-telling.

Luke gave no indication as to the length of time that passed between Lydia's conversion and baptism (16:15) and this event. The pronoun **we** in this verse referred at least to Paul and Silas but also could have included Timothy (and perhaps Luke). The group was on their **way to prayer**, perhaps returning to the location where the missionary team initially met Lydia (16:13).

Luke also chose not to record the name of a **slave girl** ("certain damsel," KJV; "female slave," NIV) the team encountered at the place of prayer. The Greek term rendered *slave girl* could emphasize either the individual's youthful age or social status. The reference to the girl's **owners** ("masters," KJV) later in the verse makes clear that the young girl was a slave. Luke's primary interest in the girl—and no doubt Paul's greatest concern—was that she was possessed of a **spirit by which she predicted the future** ("a spirit of divination," KJV, ESV). Her masters, on the other hand, cared only that **she made a large profit** for them. They did not care that this young girl was spiritually dominated by a destructive evil spirit. Neither were they concerned with the well-being of the people who spent their money in desperate hopes of receiving a good prediction from the girl.

The phrase *a spirit by which she predicted the future* can be literally translated “a spirit of python.” In Greek mythology, the entrance to the shrine of the oracle at Delphi [DEHL figh] was guarded by a giant serpent—that is, a python. In one version of the legend, Apollo, the son of Zeus, killed the serpent in revenge and thus gained access to the oracle. Later, a priestess at Delphi known as the Pythia would grant selected females oracles concerning future events. Some skeptical Romans accused these women of using ventriloquism as a trick to deceive people who sought their services. On the other hand, the apostle Paul knew from Scripture that **fortune-telling** and the idols associated with that practice were a front for the power of the devil (see 1 Cor. 10:18-21).

The Greek word rendered *profit* can refer either to a business or to the proceeds gained from a business. In Acts 16:16, Luke obviously was referring to the profits the owners had accumulated as a result of the slave girl’s activities. They viewed her as nothing more than a business asset rather than as a vulnerable human being who needed to be valued and helped. She was a statistic on their bottom line.

The term rendered *fortune-telling* should not be thought of as a carnival feature or a parlor game. The Greek word refers to practicing divination, giving oracles that originate from demonic sources. Ancient emperors and generals, as well as ordinary people who could pay, wanted to know what the future held. They were often desperate enough to buy that knowledge.

Divination was one of the pagan practices the Israelites were warned against adopting before they entered the promised land (Deut. 18:10). Later, when King Saul grew impatient because God had not answered him, he visited a medium, who consulted a spirit for Saul (2 Sam. 28:7-8). God’s prophets consistently condemned the practice (Isa. 2:6; Jer. 14:14; Ezek. 13:9).

VERSE 17

As she followed Paul and us she cried out, “These men, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God.”

Luke reported that the slave girl made a habit of trailing the missionary team around the city. The tenses of the two verbs **followed** and **cried out** emphasize, respectively, continuing and progressive actions. That is, as the girl continually followed **Paul** and the team around, she kept on shouting—like a town crier—an oracle about the men. Her behavior was reminiscent of some Gospel accounts in which demon-possessed individuals recognized Jesus even when other people did not. Such a man in Gerasa, for example, used language for God similar to the slave girl’s (see Luke 8:28).

Interestingly, the slave girl's oracle, or declaration, sounded true enough on the surface. It featured two assertions. First, the girl's repeated cry claimed that Paul and his team were **proclaiming ... the way of salvation**. Second, the oracle described Paul and his team as **servants of the Most High God**. Both assertions could be said to be true. On the other hand, the two claims were ambiguous enough to be open to different interpretations—a characteristic feature of fortune-telling both then and now.

For example, in the phrase *way of salvation* (the Greek text does not contain the definite article *the*), the term *salvation* could refer to physical deliverance or preservation, often in the face of impending death. Salvation of this type usually required a deliverer-savior, and the Roman empire had no shortage of such saviors. The emperor himself was seen as a savior, and deliverance was the goal of several Roman mystery cults. While a Jewish or Christian audience would have connected the phrase *way of salvation* with the God of Israel, the Gentile hearers in Philippi easily could have been understood the phrase in other ways.

Further, the title **Most High God** could have been misinterpreted by the Philippian citizens as a reference to Zeus, the highest god in the Greek pantheon. In the synagogue or among a group of Christ-followers, people would have understood the title as referring to the one true God. The slave girl's oracle did not make clear which God or type of deliverance was meant.

VERSE 18

She did this for many days. Paul was greatly annoyed. Turning to the spirit, he said, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!” And it came out right away.

The girl's proclamation about the missionary team was not a one-time event: **she did this for many days**. We might wonder whether the slave girl was hostile toward the missionaries and how many days she kept up her antics. Luke provided none of these details, but he did indicate that **Paul was greatly annoyed** (“grieved,” KJV). This Greek term can also mean “thoroughly aggravated or distressed over someone's provocative activity.” The word appears in Acts 4:2 to describe the reaction of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to the apostles' preaching about the resurrection through Jesus.

Paul's aggravation might have been from a concern that the slave girl's constant shouting distracted hearers from the proclamation of the gospel. Perhaps the apostle feared some hearers might conclude there was little difference between the Holy Spirit-inspired message Paul preached and the girl's oracles that came through a demonic spirit. In any case, Paul directed his stern response not at the slave girl but at the evil **spirit** controlling her.

Casting out evil spirits was a feature of Jesus' ministry (Mark 5:8; Luke 4:33-36; 13:10-13). Leaders in the early church continued to exercise the Lord's power to free people from bondage to evil spirits (Acts 5:16; 8:6-7; 19:11-12). Thus, Paul commanded the evil spirit **in the name of Jesus Christ to come out** of the slave girl. He wanted the evil spirit, the girl, and any bystanders to know the source of his authority. Paul could not give the girl deliverance from her spiritual bondage, but *Jesus Christ* could!

Paul's words produced an immediate effect. The evil spirit **came out right away** ("the same hour," KJV; "at that moment," NIV). At once the young slave girl was set free from the controlling spirit. Her owners lost a major source of income.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Exorcism" on page 532 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. From what source(s) do you think most people today get their ideas about demonic powers? What is the importance of knowing that Jesus Christ demonstrated that Satan and his demons now have no real authority in God's kingdom?

Luke gave no further information about what happened to the slave girl. Instead, he moved on to show how the girl's deliverance became a different sort of problem for Paul and Silas. The girl's owners valued her only for the money she brought them as a fortune-teller, and they were unhappy about her spiritual rescue.

Sadly, there are individuals and groups today who traffic in human beings. They treat their victims as property, not as people made in God's image. The church has a calling in Christ to view all people as precious and in need of God's great salvation. We are called to proclaim the gospel, one purpose of which is to "set free the oppressed" (Luke 4:18). We must carry out our callings with courage, knowing that when we do so we are likely to face hostility or worse from the modern counterparts of this Philippian slave girl's owners.

THE COMPLAINT (Acts 16:19)

VERSE 19

When her owners realized that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities.

The slave girl's owners immediately directed their wrath on the perceived source of their financial woes, the missionaries. In the entirety of Acts, Luke recorded only one other incident in which a Gentile crowd attacked Christian missionaries. That second incident occurred in Ephesus under similar circumstances. That is, Paul's preaching of the gospel led so many citizens to new life in Christ that the sales for silver idols of a pagan goddess plummeted. In reaction to their loss of income, the city's craftsmen started a riot with the purpose of harming Paul and his missionary coworkers (19:23-41).

In Philippi, the irate owners of the slave girl took matters into their own hands. They **seized Paul and Silas**. The word rendered *seized* literally means "laid hold of" and often implies an act done in an aggressive manner. In other words, the owners did not politely ask the two missionaries to accompany them; they physically assaulted Paul and Silas and **dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities** ("before the rulers," ESV).

Where were Timothy and Luke, and why were they not taken into custody along with Paul and Silas? Luke did not give those details, so we can only speculate. But as mentioned in Session 6, the possible answers include the following: (1) Timothy and Luke were not with Paul and Silas at the time; or (2) Timothy and Luke were not viewed as being directly responsible for the slave girl's healing. In any case, Timothy does not appear again in the narrative of Acts until he and Silas remained in Berea while Paul went on to Athens (17:14-15).

EXPLORE FURTHER

What are your biggest fears about getting involved in helping devalued, exploited, or oppressed people in your community? What is your church currently doing to confront the devaluation of human beings? What more could be done if more believers got involved?

VALUED BY GOD (Ps. 139:13-16)

VERSE 13

For it was you who created my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

In Psalm 139, the psalmist David moved from reflecting on God's all-encompassing knowledge (139:1-6) and God's pervasive presence (139:7-12) to marveling at God's amazing, personal role in creating him. Verse 13 is composed of two lines that describe God's activity. The placement in the

Hebrew text of the word for **you** at the beginning of the first line reinforced the psalmist's conviction that God was the One at work. The Hebrew word translated **inward parts** ("reins," KJV; "inmost being," NIV) literally refers to the kidneys. In ancient Israelite thinking, the kidneys symbolized all of a person's vital inner organs and served as the seat of human emotions. By using this term, David was emphasizing that God had been instrumental in the most minute aspects of his formation.

The Hebrew verb rendered **created** ("possessed," KJV; "formed," ESV) can mean "to get" or "to acquire." The word was used of Abraham's acquiring a field where he and Sarah would be buried (Gen. 25:10) as well as of God's delivering (or purchasing) the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 15:16).

The second line of Psalm 139:13 repeats the basic thought of the first line but shifts the imagery. In addition to God's being described as Creator, the psalmist saw God as a divine weaver. The Hebrew term rendered **knit me together** can also mean "to cover" or "to overshadow." Job used similar language in expressing God's creative activity: "You clothed me with skin and flesh, and wove me together with bones and tendons" (Job 10:11).

David acknowledged that God worked His special life-giving creativity inside his **mother's womb**. The psalmist was aware of the human roles of husband and wife in the activity of procreation, yet in the final analysis God's divine power caused human life to come into being as a result. God was (and is) actively and intimately involved in the creation of each individual person.

VERSE 14

I will praise you because I have been remarkably and wondrously made. Your works are wondrous, and I know this very well.

In a previous section of verses, David's response to God's pervasive presence was to affirm God's leadership and protection in his life (see 139:10). In verse 14, David's response to God's involvement in his conception and birth was to **praise** God. The Hebrew word translated *praise* can also mean "give thanks." The prophet Isaiah used the same word when he said, "On that day you will say: 'I will give thanks to you, LORD'" (Isa. 12:1). Those things for which we are grateful, when we are truly grateful, lead us to express that gratitude to God in the form of praise.

The reason David praised, or thanked, the Lord was because he realized that he had been **remarkably and wondrously made**. The Hebrew word that is translated *remarkably* can also be rendered "fearfully." The idea behind the term included being afraid of something, but in contexts such as verse 14 the term emphasizes awe or astonishment.

The word rendered *wondrously* (“wonderfully,” KJV, ESV, NIV) emphasizes the unusual, extraordinary, or surpassing nature of something. We find nearly half of the more than seventy occurrences of this Hebrew word in the Old Testament in the Psalms. The term was used frequently to describe God’s extraordinary works on behalf of His people Israel.

In the second line of Psalm 139:14, David reiterated his assessment of God’s works, repeating that those works **are wondrous**. The verse then ends on a note of certainty. David used a word that appears three times in the first four verses of the psalm to describe God—the word **know**. David’s claim was not that he, like God, had an all-encompassing knowledge. Rather, David had examined the evidence and was absolutely certain that—to put it in colloquial terms of today—God doesn’t make any junk. David knew exceedingly well the care with which God had made him. It is that same wondrous divine care with which God creates every person.

VERSE 15

**My bones were not hidden from you when I was made in secret,
when I was formed in the depths of the earth.**

The psalmist David then made a claim about God’s knowledge followed by two conditions under which we find that claim to be true. The claim was that the psalmist’s bones **were not hidden** from God. Ancient Israelites thought of bones as the source of the body’s strength and vitality. One of Job’s friends spoke of one whose skeletal frame was “full of youthful vigor” (Job 20:11). Bones could also refer to the whole body, especially in a situation where one’s health had been compromised. In Psalm 6:2, the psalmist prayed, “Heal me, LORD, for my bones are shaking.” The psalmist David certainly had no concept of an X-ray machine, but he understood clearly that God could see the inner parts of his body.

The phrases **made in secret** and **formed in the depths of the earth** are two ways of making the same point. The first phrase states the fact of God’s activity in the psalmist’s conception. The second phrase speaks of the intricate design that God skillfully employed.

In the first phrase, the location of David’s conception was *in secret*. This Hebrew term can mean “a covering, a hiding place, or a secret place.” It is possible in Psalm 139:15 that the term is a reference to a mother’s womb. Similarly, the second phrase, *depths of the earth* was sometimes used figuratively to refer to the hiddenness of the womb. God was in heaven, and David’s life began on earth in the secret confines of his mother’s womb. Nevertheless, God saw and knew everything about David even then. The same is true for every human being today from the moment of conception.

VERSE 16

Your eyes saw me when I was formless; all my days were written in your book and planned before a single one of them began.

The psalmist then pictured God looking down on His creation. The Hebrew word translated **formless** (“my substance,” KJV; my unformed substance,” ESV; “my unformed body,” NIV) appears only here in the entire Old Testament. The verb form of the word can mean “to wrap up or fold together.” The idea is that God **saw** David even in embryonic form in his mother’s womb. Today’s ultrasound technology can give parents a blurry view of the marvelous picture that God has always been able to see clearly. Thus, we have greater reason than the psalmist David could imagine to celebrate God’s remarkable, wonderful creative work.

Up to this point, the psalmist had focused on the creation of human life, particularly his own life. Now, however, David celebrated God’s activity in the events of his life before he was born. The **days** that the psalmist would experience already **were written** in God’s **book** of life. The Hebrew word translated **planned** (“fashioned,” KJV; “formed,” ESV; “ordained,” NIV) was also used in Scripture to describe God’s forming Adam from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). Further, the prophet Isaiah used the term to describe God’s fashioning the Israelites into a covenant nation (Isa. 43:1).

However, the word can also mean “to plan.” God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to say, “Yes, I have spoken; so I will also bring it about. I have planned it; I will also do it” (Isa. 46:11). Thus, we could understand the psalmist David to mean that God had determined each and every move the psalmist would make before a single day began. But rather than attributing to God an absolute determinism of all our deeds—good or sinful—we would do better to conclude that the psalmist was praising God for His foreknowledge. Our Maker never forgets any of us. He knows who we are, who He wants us to become, and what He wants us to do.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How would you want to see your church or Bible study group become even more involved in supporting the sanctity of human life? What more can you do as an individual believer to take a stand for Christian values in today’s culture?

INCOMPLETE PICTURE

God uses believers to help others better understand the gospel.

Christians can get into some passionate discussions about baptism. Jesus clearly expected His followers to baptize new converts to the faith (Matt. 28:19), and the early church undoubtedly obeyed Jesus' command (Acts 2:41; 8:38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15,33; 18:8). Still, questions about some specifics regarding baptism arose within a couple of generations after Jesus' ascension. For example, in one post-New Testament document focusing on the apostles' doctrinal teaching, it was recommended that, if possible, baptism should be carried out in cold, running water. The document went on to say, however, that warm water could be used if no other option was available. That the document presented these options shows that Christians had questions about the subject, and early church leaders sought to provide guidance.

Other questions have surfaced since the first centuries of church history: What is the proper mode (method) of baptism? Who can administer it? Is baptism mystical or symbolic, a sacrament or an ordinance? What is the relationship between baptism and the Lord's Supper? Answers to these and other questions have become distinguishing doctrines for various Christian groups. While some debates about baptism fall under the category of "agree to disagree," others go to the heart of the ordinance's meaning and significance. Such discussions can be difficult and should be carried out in Christian love. The goal should always be fidelity to Scripture and the gospel.

This session focuses on two episodes that occurred in the Greek city of Ephesus during the early days of Paul's third missionary journey. Both episodes feature clarifying discussions about the meaning of Christian baptism. In the first episode, Aquila and Priscilla, a Christian couple whom Paul met and worked with in Corinth, had moved to Ephesus. They took the initiative to help a popular Christian teacher understand doctrine more accurately. In the second episode, Paul arrived in Ephesus and helped some former disciples of John the Baptist embrace the gospel and Christian baptism.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ACTS 18:24–19:41

Paul's second missionary journey concluded when he returned to Antioch of Syria after spending a brief time in Ephesus, sailing to Caesarea, and making a quick visit to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 18:18–22). How long Paul spent in Antioch before setting out on a third missionary journey is unclear. What seems evident, however, is that Paul never stopped thinking about the churches he had established “in the region of Galatia and Phrygia” (18:23) or about the promise he had made to return to Ephesus if God allowed him to do so (18:21). Indeed, God allowed Paul to fulfill both of these desires.

We can divide Paul's ministry in Ephesus into three periods. First, the apostle spent three months trying to reach the Jews by teaching in the Ephesus synagogue. Eventually, however, some jealous Jews caused problems, and Paul moved out of the synagogue (19:8–9).

Second, Paul preached for two years in a public lecture hall in the city. During this time, both Jews and Greeks heard the gospel, and people felt its impact not only in Ephesus but also across the surrounding region. God worked through Paul to perform many miraculous healings and exorcisms. New believers confessed their sins and burned their magic books (19:10–20).

The third period of Paul's ministry in Ephesus was brief (“for a while,” 19:22), yet it was marked by a great disturbance in the city that easily could have ended in imprisonment or worse for the apostle (19:23–41). Ironically, when the disturbance arose Paul already was planning to leave Ephesus and work his way back through Macedonia and Achaia (probably to revisit churches there and collect a relief offering) and then visit Jerusalem (to deliver the relief offering) before setting out for Rome.

Paul's ministry in Ephesus was his longest stay in any one place. New Testament scholars have concluded, however, that the apostle likely stayed in touch with other churches and individuals even while ministering in Ephesus. For example, Paul likely wrote one or more letters to the church in Corinth from Ephesus. These epistles focused on responding to news he received from emissaries of the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 1:11) and in at least one letter the church sent to Paul (7:1). Paul may also have made a couple of brief trips to Corinth while he was based in Ephesus (see 2 Cor. 13:2).

At some point in time—either before Paul came to Ephesus or during one of his brief trips to Corinth—an eloquent but doctrinally deficient teacher named Apollos came to Ephesus. Overall, Paul described his ministry during his time in Ephesus as a “wide door for effective ministry” (1 Cor. 16:9), but it was also a time when he encountered strong opposition.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

A PARTIAL WITNESS (Acts 18:24-26)

Paul met Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth, where the couple invited him to stay with them and join in their tentmaking work (18:2-3). When Paul left Corinth to return to Antioch of Syria, Aquila and Priscilla left with him (18:18). The couple remained in Ephesus while Paul went on to Antioch (18:19). This set the stage for their ministry of spiritual mentoring.

VERSE 24

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native Alexandrian, an eloquent man who was competent in the use of the Scriptures, arrived in Ephesus.

Apollos is first mentioned in the New Testament in this passage. Paul later mentioned him by name seven times in 1 Corinthians. In that epistle, Paul portrayed him as a valued ministry coworker who had become the hero of a faction within the Corinthian church. Cephas (Peter) and Paul apparently had become the heroes of other factions (see 1 Cor. 1:11-12). Luke did not specify where Apollos traveled from, only that he **arrived in Ephesus**.

Luke gave several pieces of biographical information about Apollos in this verse. First, he was **a Jew**. A large number of Jews had fled for refuge to Egypt after the Babylonian conquest of Judah in the sixth century BC (2 Kings 25:26; Jer. 43:4-7). Some of them, presumably including Apollos's ancestors, had settled in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. At least one hundred thousand Jews lived in Alexandria by the first century AD. As a Jew, Apollos would have been well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament).

Second, Luke noted that Apollos was **a native Alexandrian** ("born at Alexandria," KJV). The city of Alexandria, founded by and named for Alexander the Great, was situated on the western side of the Nile River delta. It became the second largest city in the Roman Empire and was arguably the intellectual center of the world during Paul's time. The city was famous for its library containing over four hundred thousand volumes. The Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, was produced there.

Not surprisingly, then, Luke noted that Apollos was **an eloquent man** ("a learned man," NIV). The Greek word rendered *eloquent* appears only here in the New Testament. It can refer to being well-educated or having superb rhetorical skills. Based on Apollos's preaching and teaching in the synagogue, Luke may have intended to apply both meanings of the word to Apollos. In other words, Apollos was smart, and he could preach too.

Finally, Luke noted that Apollos was **competent in the use of the Scriptures**. The Greek word translated *competent* (“mighty,” KJV; “thorough knowledge,” NIV) implies that Apollos not only knew what the Scriptures said but also was skillful in applying their meaning. In other words, he was a persuasive speaker because he understood and used Scripture wisely.

VERSE 25

He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately about Jesus, although he knew only John’s baptism.

Luke continued his introduction of Apollos in this verse, but the final fact Luke mentioned makes the first three descriptions ambiguous. First, Apollos had been **instructed in the way of the Lord**. Luke had used the same Greek word rendered *instructed* in the introduction of his Gospel to refer to the basic teachings of the gospel—the narrative of Jesus’ birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension (see Luke 1:4). Apollos, therefore, was not only well-versed in the Old Testament, including the great messianic passages, but someone had taught him about Jesus’ fulfillment of the Scriptures as Israel’s Messiah. It is unclear, however, whether Apollos had believed in Christ when he came to Ephesus or was only knowledgeable about the Lord.

Second, Luke described Apollos as being **fervent in spirit** (“spoke with great fervor,” NIV). Most English Bible translations interpret this phrase to refer to Apollos’s zeal, or passion, rather than to his having the Holy Spirit. Again, the final phrase of verse 24 colors the interpretation.

Third, Apollos **was speaking and teaching accurately about Jesus**. The Greek word translated *accurately* (“diligently,” KJV) refers to doing something in conformity with a norm or standard. Again, knowing the correct things to say concerning the gospel does not necessarily mean that a person is a believer. Knowing the truth about Jesus is important, to be sure. In the end, however, salvation is about trusting in Jesus Christ. Apollos would be neither the first nor last teacher to be confused on that issue.

Fourth, Luke pointed out that Apollos **knew only John’s baptism**. This is almost certainly a reference to John the Baptist and the baptism of repentance John called for in anticipation of the Messiah’s kingdom and the forgiveness of sins (see Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; John 1:26-27). John the Baptist distinguished between his baptism of people in water and Christ’s coming baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire, which would have a far superior impact (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16).

Thus, some Bible teachers have questioned whether Apollos was truly a believer before he came to Ephesus or whether he was a Christian teacher

who simply had a deficient understanding of baptism. The fact that he was not baptized in the name of Jesus after Aquila and Priscilla mentored him seems to indicate that he was a believer, albeit one with a view of Christian baptism that needed correcting (compare Acts 19:5-6).

VERSE 26

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. After Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately.

When Apollos arrived in Ephesus, **he began to speak boldly in the synagogue.** The Greek word translated *speak boldly* occurs only nine times in the New Testament. The other eight occurrences refer to Paul or his missionary companions as they proclaimed the gospel. For example, the term was used to describe Paul's bold gospel proclamation in Damascus and Jerusalem following his conversion (Acts 9:27-28). Luke also used different forms of the same word to describe the preaching of Peter, John, and the other early followers whom the Jewish leaders commanded to cease talking about Jesus (4:13,29,31) In Ephesians 6:20, Paul asked fellow believers to pray for him to speak boldly about Christ even while the apostle was imprisoned. Like these Christian leaders, Apollos also proclaimed the message about Jesus without hesitation or fear.

Priscilla and Aquila evidently attended the synagogue where Apollos was speaking. They had come from Corinth to Ephesus with Paul at the conclusion of the second missionary journey, and the couple remained in Ephesus when Paul left to return to Antioch of Syria (Acts 18:18-22). The Greek word rendered **took him aside** ("invited him to their home," NIV) can also mean "to extend a welcome and receive into one's home or circle of acquaintances." In other words, Priscilla and Aquila recognized right away that Apollos was in error in some aspects of his gospel teaching. Rather than embarrassing the man with a public rebuke, they invited Apollos to a more private setting where they could mentor him.

This Christian couple's actions provide a worthy example for contemporary churches. Aquila and Priscilla undoubtedly recognized and applauded Apollos's preaching abilities. They admired his boldness in talking about Jesus the Messiah. Yet they did not minimize the need for proclaiming complete, correct Christian doctrine. Thus, they befriended Apollos, invited him into a more private setting, and **explained the way of God to him more accurately** ("more perfectly," KJV; "more adequately," NIV).

The phrase *way of God*, like the phrase "way of the Lord" in 18:25, probably refers to the basic truths of the gospel message. However, in light

of the notice that Apollos “knew only John’s baptism,” part of the couple’s instruction involved filling in the gaps of his deficient understanding of Christian baptism. Similarly, believers today must be vigilant in examining the truth of what we hear taught and preached. We should be humble about our own doctrinal understandings, always respectful to other believers, and guided by love and gentleness when correcting those who are in error.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Doctrine” on pages 435–436 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are the dangers of allowing false or incomplete doctrine to be taught in a church? What are some resources that help believers know what is correct and complete Christian doctrine?

A COMPLETE WITNESS (Acts 18:27-28)

VERSE 27

When he wanted to cross over to Achaia, the brothers and sisters wrote to the disciples to welcome him. After he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.

At some point after his mentoring encounter with Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos decided **to cross over to Achaia** [uh KAY yuh]. In the New Testament period, Achaia was a Roman province in the southern region of what is now Greece. Corinth was the capital of Achaia, and we discover in Acts 19:1 that this city was Apollos’s specific destination.

Luke revealed neither the exact timing nor the reason for Apollos’s move to Corinth. One early Christian tradition suggests that a group of itinerant believers heard Apollos preach in Ephesus and invited him to go to Corinth with them. Possibly, however, Priscilla and Aquila saw in Apollos someone who could reach the Corinthian Jewish population for Christ and urged him to go there. Whatever the actual reason for Apollos’s departure from Ephesus, the Ephesian church members supported him in the endeavor. They **wrote to the disciples** in Corinth, urging them **to welcome him**.

It was not uncommon in the first century AD for itinerant preachers and teachers to carry letters of recommendation. In the absence of instant communication, such letters gave churches greater assurance about a traveling teacher’s integrity. In a farewell address to the Ephesian elders, the apostle Paul warned of unscrupulous teachers who later would “come in” and do harm to the church (Acts 20:29).

Apollos's move to Corinth proved beneficial for the believers there. He was **a great help to those who by grace had believed**. No doubt Apollos was an effective evangelist among the Jews in Corinth, but he also became a wonderful disciple-maker. He helped believers grow in their faith. The doctrinal mentoring that Aquila and Priscilla had invested in Apollos in Ephesus paid spiritual dividends as Apollos ministered in Corinth. Paul later mentioned Apollos's effective ministry in Corinth when he wrote, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6).

VERSE 28

For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating through the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah.

Luke described Apollos's evangelistic and apologetic activity with a Greek word found only here in the New Testament. The word rendered **refuted** ("convinced," KJV) means "to overwhelm someone in an argument." Luke added that Apollos spoke **vigorously** ("mightily," KJV; "powerfully," ESV). That is, Apollos displayed energy and passion in his delivery; the message he proclaimed was crucial for his hearers to know, understand, and accept.

The phrase **in public** probably refers primarily to the synagogue, which was the setting for Apollos's preaching when he was in Ephesus (Acts 18:26). In the synagogue in Corinth, Apollos skillfully used **the Scriptures** (the Old Testament) to prove **Jesus is the Messiah** ("Christ," KJV, ESV). As mentioned in a previous session, the word rendered *Messiah* (and the Greek equivalent term *Christ*) literally means "anointed one." The reality of Jesus' being the Son of God and anointed Savior was a prominent theme in the early church's proclamation of the gospel. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter quoted Psalm 16:10 to prove "the resurrection of the Messiah" (Acts 2:31). Peter then declared in the same sermon that the people of Israel had every reason to believe with certainty that the same Jesus they had crucified was "both Lord and Messiah" (2:36). In Thessalonica, Paul had demonstrated from Scripture that "it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise from the dead" (17:2-3).

Apollos had been mentored well and had a gift for teaching. The churches in both Ephesus and Corinth benefited from his ministry. Like Priscilla and Aquila, we must be vigilant in assuring we understand the Scriptures correctly and are teaching sound doctrine. Like Apollos, we are called to do all we can to be equipped to share the gospel and explain the Christian life to others. In addition, we should not view disdainfully those Christian leaders who choose to move to other places to minister. We can send them out with our prayers and be thankful to God for their time of ministry with us.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How confident are you in being able to explain and defend basic Christian doctrines to someone who adheres to another religion? What are some ways your church can equip and support a member who intentionally plans to become part of planting a new church?

AN INCOMPLETE FAITH (Acts 19:1-7)

When he lived in Ephesus, Apollos apparently was a believer. However, he had an incomplete understanding of at least one important Christian doctrine until Aquila and Priscilla mentored him. With their help, Apollos matched his rhetorical skill with sound doctrine and then went to Corinth to preach and teach about Jesus the Messiah. Sometime during Apollos's period of ministry in Corinth, Paul returned to Ephesus.

VERSES 1-2

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior regions and came to Ephesus. He found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” “No,” they told him, “we haven’t even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

Paul returned to Antioch of Syria at the conclusion of the second missionary journey (18:22). Before long, however, he desired to check on the churches in the region of Galatia again and then to return to Ephesus. The phrase rendered **interior regions** (“upper coasts,” KJV; “inland country,” ESV) refers to the route Paul took in traversing east to west across what is today the country of Turkey. By taking the more mountainous route through the central highlands, the apostle could check on the believers in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia. In time, however, Paul **came to Ephesus** on the western coast, fulfilling a promise he had made to return there to minister (18:21).

In Ephesus, Paul **found some disciples**. The Greek word translated *disciples* could certainly be used to refer to followers of Christ. Literally, however, a disciple was someone who followed after and learned from a teacher. We know from all four Gospels that John the Baptist also had disciples (Matt. 11:2; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33; John 3:25). In fact, Simon Peter's brother, Andrew, was at one time a disciple of John (John 1:40). Whether the people whom Paul encountered in Ephesus had been actual followers of John

the Baptist is not clear. However, they did confess to Paul that they had been baptized according to John's teaching about baptism (Acts 19:3).

In any case, something in what the men said or did caused Paul to question whether they were believers or simply people who had not yet heard the true gospel in Jesus Christ. Paul's question (**Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?**) indicated that he considered the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life as a key indicator of whether the person was a genuine believer. They had not even heard that there was a Holy Spirit! They had heard and responded to the message of John the Baptist, but they had not heard the church's message of the gospel.

VERSE 3

"Into what then were you baptized?" he asked them. "Into John's baptism," they replied.

Paul's second question must also have come from a deeper conversation with these disciples. That is, Paul already had discerned that the men had been baptized. Their lack of knowledge about the Holy Spirit, however, pointed to an incomplete message and thus an incomplete faith. Their response indicated they had never moved from a commitment to John's baptism to faith in the One to whom John bore witness—Jesus the Messiah.

VERSE 4

Paul said, "John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people that they should believe in the one who would come after him, that is, in Jesus."

Having assessed the spiritual condition of these men, Paul provided them with the information they needed to become followers of Christ. Just as the prior conversation with these men was more detailed than the summary Luke provided, we can be confident that Paul's presentation of the gospel was a more detailed explanation. Paul's main point to the men was that John the Baptist's role had been to call people to **repentance** and point them to the coming of Jesus the promised Messiah.

VERSE 5

When they heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

When they had heard Paul's presentation of the gospel, the group trusted in the One about whom John the Baptist had prophesied. Further, the men

were baptized **into the name of the Lord Jesus**. The event of baptism is the primary difference between these men and Apollos. Since Apollos had already received the Holy Spirit, submitting to a second baptism would have been unnecessary. This event is the only time in the New Testament where a second baptism is described. The unique circumstances surrounding this event should caution us against using it as a model for baptism today.

VERSES 6-7

And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began to speak in other tongues and to prophesy. Now there were about twelve men in all.

After the men were baptized, Paul **laid his hands on them**. Three things happened as a result. First, **the Holy Spirit came on them**. In Acts, the Holy Spirit's coming on people was confirmation of their salvation. Second, the men **began to speak in other tongues**, and third, they began **to prophesy**. The final two activities were, in fact, demonstrations of the first. This event is the only time in the New Testament where the practice of laying on hands immediately followed baptism.

Some students of the Scriptures have noticed parallels between this event in Ephesus and the account of the Samaritans' response to the gospel under the preaching of Philip (see Acts 8:12-17). In both instances, for example, the Spirit-led teachers laid on hands immediately before the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, though in the Samaritans' case a delay occurred between the baptism and the laying on of hands. Further, Luke made no mention of the Samaritans' having spoken in other tongues or having prophesied. When the Holy Spirit fell on those gathered in Cornelius's house, the new converts spoke "in other tongues ... declaring the greatness of God," but no one laid hands on them (10:45-6). Thus, no normative pattern existed in the early church for the events that accompanied the reception of the Holy Spirit. God gave His spirit as He saw fit. However, genuine faith in Christ was demonstrated through baptism in the name of Jesus and was accompanied by the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38).

EXPLORE FURTHER

What types of evidence do you look for in yourself and others that reveals a genuine experience of salvation in Christ? How would you explain to a spiritual seeker the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation?

DELIVERED

Sharing the gospel is worth the sacrifice and effort.

Long-running celebrities in the entertainment and sports worlds often cap off their careers by going on a farewell tour. A famous rock band, for instance, might decide that they are done with the grueling pace of life on the road and announce a farewell concert tour. They play their music in sold-out venues filled with “forever fans” who want to be able to say, “I was there!” After the tour, the band rides off into retirement. For a few years. Then the passion of performing tugs at them again, or someone suggests that the band could make a boat load of money by going on a reunion farewell tour.

A similar phenomenon also happens in professional athletics. A team’s enduring star athlete—one who no doubt will be inducted into that sport’s hall of fame—will announce a plan to retire from the game at the end of the season. Suddenly all of that team’s road games for the season become a farewell tour for the athlete. Spectators who might not otherwise attend flock to those games in the hope of seeing the famous athlete compete one last time before moving to a new career in the broadcast booth.

Paul’s journey to Jerusalem at the conclusion of his third missionary journey might be viewed as a farewell tour of sorts. In town after town, the Spirit reminded the apostle that he would not see these beloved friends again. Paul’s farewell tour, however, was not an ego trip or a way to generate more wealth for himself. Instead, it was one more opportunity to teach, warn, and encourage the believers for whom he had sacrificed so much to tell them about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul was motivated by his desire to see the Lord’s church healthy and growing.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ACTS 20:1–21:26

This session’s background passage begins with Paul’s decision to leave Ephesus and travel through Macedonia to Greece. Problems in the church at

Corinth had concerned Paul while he was in Ephesus. It was from Ephesus that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, dealing with a variety of problems the church was facing. He wrote 2 Corinthians while in Macedonia, celebrating the resolution of some of the church's problems. Finally arriving in Greece, probably in Corinth, Paul stayed there for a three-month visit (Acts 20:2-3). While he was there, Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans in preparation for his planned visit to Rome and beyond. Before the trip to Rome, however, Paul needed to return to Jerusalem for a visit.

Luke's travel log in Acts 20–21 contains detailed place names interrupted by descriptions of events along the way. In Troas, for example, Paul spoke to a gathering of believers throughout the night. The all-night address was marked by the accidental injury of a young man who fell asleep and fell from a third-story window. Paul stopped speaking long enough to help the young man and share a meal with the group, then he continued to preach until dawn (20:7-12).

At Miletus, Paul sent for the church leaders of Ephesus to gather for his parting address to them. That event is the focus of this session. In Tyre, the believers warned Paul not to travel to Jerusalem (21:4). In Caesarea, Paul stayed in the house of Philip the evangelist, and there he encountered Agabus the prophet. Using Paul's belt, Agabus prophesied that Paul would be taken into custody in Jerusalem (21:8-12). In spite of the believers' pleadings, Paul continued his trip to Jerusalem.

The context passage ends with Paul's arrival in Jerusalem and his report to the church there about God's work among the Gentiles. The church leaders, grateful for the Gentile believers, nevertheless raised the issue of Jewish believers who reported that Paul was teaching Jews to abandon their commitment to the Mosaic law. The leaders proposed a plan to solve the problem, but the situation grew more tense and more dangerous for Paul.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

HIS COMMITMENT (Acts 20:22-24)

In an effort to reach Jerusalem in time for the Feast of Pentecost, Paul decided not to stop in the city of Ephesus. However, he did not want to bypass the city where he had spent so much time and effort in ministry without giving a final message of instruction and encouragement to the church there. Thus, Paul sent word for the church's leaders to meet him at Miletus, a coastal town about forty miles south of Ephesus. Paul's address to the Ephesian elders is his only extended speech directed just to believers.

VERSE 22

“And now I am on my way to Jerusalem, compelled by the Spirit, not knowing what I will encounter there,

Paul began his address to the Ephesian church leaders by reminding them that he had faithfully and courageously served the Lord all of the time he was in Ephesus (20:18-19). Moreover, he had not failed to teach believers the truths of God and to evangelize among both Jews and Gentiles (20:20-21). The apostle reminded his hearers of these things not to brag but to urge them to take his words seriously. They could trust Paul to speak the truth in love.

The words **and now** (literally “and now, behold,” KJV, ESV) indicate a change in topic. Paul transitioned from speaking of past events to telling about his current plan: making his **way to Jerusalem**. He made two initial points about this trip. First, Paul was making the journey because he was **compelled by the Spirit** (“bound in the spirit,” KJV; “constrained by the Spirit,” ESV) to do so. In the Greek text, the word rendered *Spirit* is not capitalized; thus, it can be interpreted as a reference either to the Holy Spirit or to Paul’s spirit—that is, to his own inner compulsion.

Second, Paul acknowledged that he did know what kind of reception he would **encounter** (“things that shall befall me,” KJV) in Jerusalem. In his Letter to the Romans (written during the recent three-month stay in Corinth), Paul asked those believers to pray that he might “be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea,” that the relief offering he had collected would be “acceptable to the saints” in Jerusalem, and that nothing would prevent his coming to Rome “with joy” (Rom. 15:30-31).

VERSE 23

except that in every town the Holy Spirit warns me that chains and afflictions are waiting for me.

Paul then clarified his expectations about the future. He did not know the specifics of what might occur on this particular journey. On the other hand, Paul had come to accept that serving the Lord faithfully in gospel ministry included facing hardship and persecution. The **Holy Spirit** had warned (“witnesseth,” KJV; “testifies,” ESV) Paul that **chains and afflictions** (“prison and hardships,” NIV) were a real possibility for him wherever he went.

Exactly when and how Paul received this warning from the Spirit is not clear. It might have been simply the mounting evidence of experience. That is, Paul was never in any place long before he encountered opposition to the gospel, either from legalistic Jews or pagan merchants whose finances were hurt when the Lord saved people out of idolatry and demonic bondage. Paul didn’t plan to stop preaching, so he expected to face hostility **in every town**.

VERSE 24

But I consider my life of no value to myself; my purpose is to finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God's grace.

Paul's uncertainty about the future was contrasted with the contentment he had in serving God faithfully to the end. Paul's statement **I consider my life of no value to myself** can be literally translated as "I do not consider my life worth a single word." In other words, Paul considered that whether he lived or died was not worth commenting on. What mattered most to him was that he might honor the Lord in both his life and death (see Phil. 1:20).

By prioritizing service over self, Paul kept his aim on faithfully completing his **course** and the **ministry** he **received from the Lord Jesus**. The Greek word rendered *course* could refer literally to a foot race but also was used figuratively to describe a life's work or career. The word rendered *ministry* also means "service"—it is the basis of the English word *deacon*. Paul used this term in Romans to describe his mission to the Gentiles (see Rom. 11:13), yet it could also be used to refer to a relief offering (see Rom. 15:31).

Paul was certain of one thing regarding his ministry: Christ gave it to him. Paul did not choose Christ; Christ chose him to take the gospel message to the nations even in the face of great hardship and suffering (Acts 9:15-16). Paul had already suffered much in his service to God. The Holy Spirit warned him that more suffering lay ahead. The phrase *the gospel of God's grace* occurs only here in the New Testament; its meaning is clear. Paul's lifework was to bear witness to God's gracious act of providing forgiveness and salvation through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Grace" on pages 670–672 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is your reaction to Paul's words in verse 24? How would you explain the ways and extent to which God's grace has impacted your life and work?

HIS CONCERN (Acts 20:25-31)

VERSE 25

"And now I know that none of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will ever see me again.

Paul again signaled a new topic in his speech with the words **and now**. His assertion that this was the last time these leaders would see him probably was based on his plans to travel to Rome and then Spain after visiting Jerusalem (see Rom. 15:23-25). Consequently, the statement may have represented Paul's own thoughts more than divine revelation. Based on evidence gleaned from the Epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy as well as Titus, some Bible scholars have suggested that Paul eventually gained release from prison in Rome, traveled to Spain, and then possibly made a return visit to Miletus, if not to Ephesus (see 2 Tim. 4:20). For seven or eight years, Paul had traveled throughout the regions known today as Turkey and Greece, **preaching the kingdom** of God. Now he was departing for a new field of service. We can understand the phrase *preaching the kingdom* as parallel to testifying about the gospel of God's grace.

VERSES 26-27

Therefore I declare to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, because I did not avoid declaring to you the whole plan of God.

The occasion of Paul's journey to Jerusalem led him to reflect on the ministry role the apostle had played in the Ephesian church. Paul called on the church's leaders to affirm his declaration of ministry integrity. The claim of being **innocent of the blood of all of you** was not an attempt to avoid accountability. Rather, Paul was asserting that he had faithfully carried out his calling to declare **the whole plan of God** ("all the counsel of God," KJV; "the whole will of God," NIV).

The Greek word rendered *innocent* also means "clean" or "pure." Paul's declaration of integrity brings to mind the prophet Ezekiel's oracle concerning the prophetic watchman (see Ezek. 33:1-9). Like a watchman's work atop a city's fortified wall, if danger appears on the horizon and the watchman fails to warn the city's residents, then the watchman has severe accountability for the citizens' harm. However, if the watchman warns the citizens and they ignore the warning, then the watchman is innocent of wrongdoing. Like a good watchman, Paul had preached the gospel without fail whether the response was good, tepid, or hostile. He was about to challenge the Ephesian church leaders to maintain the same integrity after he departed.

VERSE 28

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.

In this verse Paul got to the heart of his message to the Ephesian church leaders. Like good shepherds, they needed to constantly **be on guard** (“take heed,” KJV; “pay careful attention,” ESV; “keep watch,” NIV) **for all the flock** of believers under their care. This diligent care included first paying careful attention to their own spiritual well-being. Then and now, church leaders who are overwhelmed by worry and discouragement (otherwise known as burnout), who get distracted by worldly issues, or who become compromised by personal sins cannot help others grow and endure in their faith.

Second, the church leaders had a God-given responsibility to serve as **overseers** of the Christian community in that city. The Greek term rendered *overseers* is the basis for the English word *episcopal*. In biblical times, the term could be used to describe anyone who was charged with safeguarding valuables or ensuring that important work was conducted properly. In the Septuagint [sep TOO uh jint], an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the term described both military officers (see Num. 31:14; 2 Kings 11:15) and those who were caretakers of the tabernacle and its furnishings (Num. 4:16). Not until the second and third centuries AD did the Greek word come to refer to a specific church office, the bishop.

Paul further reminded the Ephesian leaders that they were accountable to **the Holy Spirit**, who had **appointed** them **to shepherd** (“to feed,” KJV; “to care for,” ESV) **the church of God**. The role of the Holy Spirit in appointing church leaders does not eliminate human involvement. In the church’s earliest days in Jerusalem, the apostles instructed the congregation to put forward seven men of good reputation and filled with the Spirit to be assigned the ministry of caring for elderly Christian widows (Acts 6:1-6). Moreover, Paul and other early Christian missionaries made a practice of appointing leaders to guide, protect, and nurture the new churches they established in various places (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). While the actual process of leader selection was not clearly described, Paul later laid out basic qualifications for church leaders (see 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:6-9). Ultimately, though, the Spirit of the Lord was responsible for placing leadership within God’s church (see Eph. 4:11-13).

Paul used the language of shepherding to describe the vital ministry of church leaders. This imagery has a rich heritage in the Old Testament. As Moses realized his leadership of Israel would soon end, he prayed for the Lord to “appoint a man over the community who will go out before them and come back in before them, and who will bring them out and bring them in, so that the LORD’s community won’t be like sheep without a shepherd” (Num. 27:16-17). In Psalm 23:1, David referred to the Lord as his unfailing shepherd. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel both used shepherd imagery in condemning the wickedness and negligence of Israel’s leaders (Jer. 23:1-2; Ezek. 34:10).

Ezekiel went on to prophesy that the Lord would one day “establish over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will shepherd them. He will tend them himself and will be their shepherd” (Ezek. 34:23). Since he prophesied this message long after the reign of King David, Ezekiel was looking ahead to the coming of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ (John 10:14-16).

Other New Testament writers also picked up the shepherd imagery from Jesus and the Old Testament. Peter exhorted church elders in his day to shepherd God’s people willingly and not out of compulsion, eagerly and not out of greed, and humbly as exemplary servants rather than as haughty spiritual masters (1 Pet. 5:2-3). They were to minister in this way, knowing that one day they would stand before the “chief Shepherd” to give an account of their ministry and receive “the unfading crown of glory” for their faithfulness (5:4).

Paul stated that *the church of God* was **purchased with his own blood**. The phrase *his own blood* would be unusual if it referred to God the Father’s blood. We should probably translate the phrase “the blood of his own [Son]”—that is, Jesus’ blood. The apostle John expressed the usual New Testament way of describing the atonement when he wrote, “if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). The Greek word rendered *purchased* (“obtained,” ESV; “bought,” NIV) means “to gain possession of; to obtain.” Jesus’ atoning death on the cross was the means by which God gained possession of His church.

VERSE 29

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

The call for church leaders to be diligent was necessary because of the difficult times ahead. Paul feared that with his **departure** false teachers, who **come in** from outside, would seek to take control over the congregation. They would come in as predators, like **savage wolves**. The Greek word translated *savage* can also mean “heavy” or “burdensome.” False teachers would have no concern for anything other than selfish gain. Like wicked, careless shepherds, they would not spare **the flock**. The Holy Spirit had appointed leaders to care for and meet the needs of the flock, which had been obtained at the cost of the Son’s own blood.

VERSE 30

Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into following them.

Paul foresaw that the church at Ephesus would face challenges not only from the outside but also from within their **own number**. Church members who were not well-grounded in Christian doctrine would come under the sway of charlatans and then try to peddle false beliefs to others in the congregation. The phrase **distort the truth** translates a Greek phrase that means “to speak crooked or perverted things.”

These false teachers sought to **lure the disciples into following them**. The Greek word rendered *lure* can also mean “draw off,” “draw away,” or “draw out.” In Matthew 26:51, the term describes the drawing out, or unsheathing, of a sword. The word’s emphasis in Acts 20:30, however, is the drawing away of vulnerable people from truth into false teaching. Paul warned the Ephesian elders to watch diligently for such dangers.

VERSE 31

Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for three years I never stopped warning each one of you with tears.

Paul began the warning section of his address with the admonition for church leaders to “be on guard” (20:28). He then underscored the warning with the command to **be on the alert** (“watch,” KJV). This Greek term refers to being in a constant state of readiness, like a soldier standing watch on a city wall. Threats could arise suddenly from without or within, so church leaders must be constantly vigilant. Paul’s two New Testament letters to Timothy reveal that the apostle was not being overly dramatic. The threat of false teachers and the need for vigilance were real (1 Tim. 1:19-20; 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 1:15).

If the Ephesian elders needed motivation to remain vigilant, they needed only to remember Paul’s example. **Night and day for three years** the apostle had been a bulwark against false teachers in Ephesus. Several points can be made about Paul’s statement in this verse. First, Paul’s ministry in Ephesus had been personal and intimate; he had served the church **with tears**. His tears may have resulted in part from the Jews’ overall rejection of the gospel and their bitter hostility toward him personally (see Rom. 9:1-3). But there were surely tears of joy as well in seeing people made alive in Christ who had been dead in their trespasses and sins (see Eph. 2:1-5).

Second, Paul’s ministry in Ephesus was tireless and enduring. The phrase *night and day* was a figure of speech meaning “constant.” However, any devoted Christian pastor today can attest that ministry is a twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week calling. False teaching, temptation, and spiritual need doesn’t stop; pastoral vigilance must not stop either.

Third, Paul characterized his ministry in Ephesus as consistently **warning each one of** the church leaders. The Greek term rendered *warning* could also

mean “instructing,” “admonishing,” or “exhorting.” Often the term related to convincing a person to stop some sort of negative conduct. In Acts 20:31, Paul probably had in mind either stopping the false teachers’ destructive conduct or stopping the church leaders from ignoring the dangers posed by false teachers in the church.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Pastor” on page 1221 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How have you seen your church’s pastor and/or other ministry leaders fulfill the descriptions Paul gave of his ministry in Ephesus in verse 31? How can you support and encourage your pastor and ministry leaders for their diligent care?

HIS COMMENDATION (Acts 20:32-35)

VERSE 32

“And now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified.

As we have seen in 20:22 and 20:25, the words **and now** signal the start of a new section, which in this case is the final section of Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders. In this section, Paul sought to pass the mantle of servant-leadership to these Spirit-appointed ministers.

The Greek word rendered **commit** has the primary meaning of “placing beside or before.” Thus, the term could be used in reference to serving a meal, that is, placing food before someone (see 16:34). The word could also mean, as it does here, “to entrust someone to the care or protection of another” (14:23). As Paul prepared to depart from Miletus, he entrusted the Ephesian church leaders **to God and to the word of his grace**. The apostle was probably not making a sharp distinction between God’s presence and His gracious message, the gospel. Then and now, God is always active in and through His Spirit as well as through His Word, the Scriptures.

Paul noted two other benefits that would occur as the leaders continued to obey God’s message. First, the Lord would build up their own faith. The Greek word rendered **build ... up** often was used in the physical sense of building construction (see Matt. 7:24; Acts 7:47). Figuratively, the term could refer to strengthening or equipping someone to live in a responsible way (see Acts 9:31; 1 Thess. 5:11). Paul meant that God would strengthen obedient

and alert church leaders, so they would be able to combat the future threats of false teachers. The second benefit was that the Ephesian elders could expect to receive **an inheritance among all who are sanctified**. There will be eternal rewards awaiting those who have served the Lord faithfully and well (Jas. 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4).

VERSES 33-34

I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that I worked with my own hands to support myself and those who are with me.

Paul addressed an issue that has caused far too many ministers to stumble: greed. Wealth in Paul's world generally took the form of precious metals, food, and clothing. To be sure, both Jesus (in Luke 10:7) and Paul (in 1 Tim. 5:18) taught that ministers are worthy of being supported and that churches should provide for the physical needs of their ministers. In some places, however, Paul chose to support himself and his missionary team even as they evangelized and taught believers. Ephesus had been one of those places, along with Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8) and Corinth (1 Cor. 9:12).

VERSE 35

In every way I've shown you that it is necessary to help the weak by laboring like this and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, because he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Paul had demonstrated in his ministry the importance of helping **the weak**—that is, vulnerable people who were in real need. The heart of the gospel is God's willingness to do for sinners what we are helpless to do for ourselves. Christian leaders are called to be the servant hands and feet of God by ministering in His name.

The saying that Paul attributed to Jesus about the blessedness of giving does not appear in the Gospels. On the other hand, the saying is consistent with Jesus' teachings (see Luke 6:30 for example) and character. Paul understood that the antidote for covetousness is a giving heart. Church leaders should model a spirit that seeks opportunities to give.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How does your church provide opportunities to participate in evangelism? In meeting the physical needs of others? How have you found it to be true that it is more blessed to give than to receive?

THE TESTIMONY

The gospel transforms people from sinners into instruments of God.

The personal stories we share with others tell something about who we are and what we value. They put our lives in historical context. They reveal our foundations as well as our hopes and dreams.

When my family gathered for my father's memorial service, we all spent a great deal of the time telling stories about him. I heard some of those stories for the first time while sitting at my father's hospital bedside a few weeks before he died. For example, there was a story that involved one of his first jobs. One of his coworkers at the business devised a way to cheat customers. At the time, my father was only twenty years old, not long out of high school, and living a hundred miles away from his parents. Nevertheless, he took a stand and refused to go along with the dishonest scheme. His integrity got him transferred to a store in another town several hours away.

Then there was another story about my father's traveling from Texas to Clinton, Mississippi to check out a Baptist college in that town. Dad made the trip with a young pastor who also was visiting the school. In short, Dad stayed at Mississippi College and then later moved to New Orleans, Louisiana, to attend seminary and prepare further for a life of ministry. That life came to include serving as a pastor for churches in Mississippi, Japan, and Thailand.

This session focuses on an occasion when the apostle Paul told his story of salvation. That occasion was not a memorial service, but it was memorable. The study will encourage us to always be ready to tell others what Jesus Christ did for us and what He will do for all who put their faith in Him.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ACTS 21:27–23:22

Luke included the story of Paul's conversion in three places in the Book of Acts—the event as it happened on the road to Damascus (9:1-19); Paul's

defense before a mob at the temple in Jerusalem (22:6-21); and Paul's defense before King Agrippa (26:12-18). The Scripture context for this session includes the second narration of Paul's conversion experience.

Near the conclusion of his third missionary journey, Paul decided to visit Jerusalem during the Feast of Pentecost (20:16). One purpose of the visit was to deliver a relief offering for needy Jewish Christians in Judea that had been given by churches in Macedonia, Achaia, and Galatia (see 24:17; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-6). In spite of receiving several warnings along the way to avoid going to Jerusalem at this time (Acts 21:4,10-12), Paul and some fellow travelers arrived in the city, and believers there gave them a warm welcome (21:17). Church leaders warned Paul, however, that Jewish legalists in the city were spreading rumors about him. They were saying that Paul taught Jews outside of Judea to abandon the law of Moses (21:21), and they were looking for an opportunity to confront the apostle (21:22).

That opportunity came the next day when Paul accompanied his fellow travelers into the temple complex to complete the requirements of a purification vow. A group of Jewish pilgrims from the region around Ephesus stirred up the temple crowd against Paul, accusing him of bringing a Gentile into a restricted area. The crowd quickly turned into a mob bent on killing Paul. Only the intervention of a Roman commander prevented the slaying. As the commander took Paul into custody and began to lead him away, Paul asked for an opportunity to address the people and give a defense of himself (21:26-40).

Paul's address to the people included his testimony of conversion and his call from God to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (22:1-21). His mention of God's desire to include the Gentiles set off a new round of vitriol by the crowd. The people called for Paul's death, but the commander ordered that Paul be removed to another place and scourged. Only Paul's assertion of his Roman citizenship prevented the beating from being carried out (22:22-29).

The next day Paul was ordered to appear before the Jewish ruling council and defend himself. The hearing soon became chaotic and violent, and the commander sent a squad of soldiers to return Paul to the Roman barracks (22:30-23:10). That night the Lord encouraged Paul by affirming that he would one day testify of Christ in Rome just as he had boldly testified in Jerusalem (23:11).

The Jews' animosity toward Paul continued to grow, and forty men took a vow not to eat until Paul was killed. Paul's nephew heard of the plot, however, and reported his discovery to the commander (23:12-21). The section ends with the commander's making plans to secretly move Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast (23:22). In Caesarea, Paul would soon appear before several Roman officials and give his testimony again.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

Paul addressed the hostile temple crowd by sharing stories about his former life, his encounter with the resurrected Lord, and the mission God gave him. Paul's encounter with Jesus had changed him completely.

FORMER LIFE (Acts 22:3-5)

VERSE 3

He continued, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the law of our ancestors. I was zealous for God, just as all of you are today.

Paul began his defense by identifying himself as **a Jew** and by emphasizing his personal heritage, which he organized around three verbs: **born**, **brought up**, and **educated**. This may have been a common way in Paul's day of identifying one's cultural heritage. The deacon Stephen, for example, used the same three Greek verbs in describing Moses' early life (see Acts 7:20-22).

Tarsus, the place of Paul's birth, was the capital of the Roman province of **Cilicia** [sih LISH ih uh], located in the southeastern region of present-day Turkey. However, he evidently had been spent some of his growing-up years in Jerusalem (**in this city**). The Greek word rendered *brought up* appears only three times in the New Testament—once in this verse and twice in Stephen's description of Moses' early years (7:20,21). The word's basic meaning is “to provide nurture.” Such nurture could refer to caring for the physical needs of a young child or to training someone who might be a young adult. Thus, some Bible teachers conclude that Paul grew up in Tarsus and was sent to Jerusalem for his education. Other Bible students suggest that Paul's family moved from Tarsus to Jerusalem when he was quite young; therefore, for all practical purposes, the boy was raised in Jerusalem.

In either scenario, Paul received his education in Judaism (**the law of our ancestors**) under one of the most revered rabbis of the time. **Gamaliel** [guh MAY lih uhl] was a member of the Pharisees [FEHR uh seez], the largest and most influential Jewish religious-political party in New Testament times. He was the son (or grandson) of an even more famous teacher, the great Rabbi Hillel. As a Pharisee—the word means “separated one”—Gamaliel would have taught Paul to separate himself from sinners, especially pagan Gentiles, and to devote himself to the rigorous study and rigid practice of the Torah.

Gamaliel's first appearance in the Book of Acts comes in the earliest days of the church. When Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin for refusing to stop preaching about Jesus, some council members wanted to

put the two apostles to death. Gamaliel persuaded the council to take a more measured approach to Peter and John's punishment, perhaps thinking that the Christian movement would soon fail on its own (5:34-39).

Paul confirmed that his upbringing and training under Gamaliel had made him **zealous for God**. The church leaders in Jerusalem had urged Paul upon his arrival to show the legalists that he was as passionate about observing the law as they were. In fact, that had been the motive behind the leaders' plan for Paul to accompany four men to fulfill a purification vow at the temple (21:23-24). Paul readily affirmed to his Jewish accusers that he had not lost the enthusiastic desire to obey what God commands.

VERSES 4-5a

I persecuted this Way to the death, arresting and putting both men and women in jail, as both the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me.

The early designation of Christians as followers of **this Way** probably was derived from Isaiah 40:3, a verse quoted and applied to Jesus in all four of the Gospels (Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23). In Acts, Luke used various expanded forms of the designation, including "the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17), "the way of the Lord" (18:25), and "the way of God" (18:26).

Before Paul's conversion, his zeal for God led him to persecute believers. The phrase **to the death** could refer to an intent to stamp out the Christian movement, but that aim resulted in the actual deaths and imprisonment of many of Christ's followers (see Acts 7:58; 8:1; 9:1-2). Paul's personal hand in the murder of Christians may have been limited to support for the executioners or voting in the Sanhedrin to carry out the death sentence. But he never forgot the atrocities he had participated in as a consequence of his zeal without knowledge (Prov. 19:2; Rom. 10:2). He had put **both men and women in jail** merely for being Christians.

Paul's vicious actions had been accomplished with the full knowledge and approval of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. Caiaphas had been **the high priest** at the time of Jesus' crucifixion; the current high priest was Ananias (see Acts 23:2), who served as high priest from AD 47-58. At least some members of the current **council of elders** were likely present and could attest to Paul's zealous activities against believers in the past.

VERSE 5b

After I received letters from them to the brothers, I traveled to Damascus to arrest those who were there and bring them to Jerusalem to be punished.

Paul recalled that he had received written authorization from the Sanhedrin to make the journey to Damascus (about one hundred seventy miles) **to arrest** more of Christ's followers. His goal was to **bring them to Jerusalem for punishment**. Paul later admitted that his aim was to pressure the believers to publicly blaspheme Jesus (Acts 26:11). At that time, he considered such efforts to be work that earned him merit with God (see Phil. 3:4-6). However, in his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul learned that only faith in the gracious act of God in Christ would give him right standing with God.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How would you briefly describe your cultural background to a new acquaintance? What would you say about your life before receiving Jesus Christ as Savior? What was your attitude about church at that time?

LIFE-CHANGING ENCOUNTER (Acts 22:6-8, 15-16)

VERSE 6

"As I was traveling and approaching Damascus, about noon an intense light from heaven suddenly flashed around me.

Paul's former life was interrupted by an encounter with Jesus. As stated in the Understand the Context section, Luke included the story of Paul's conversion in three places in the Book of Acts—the event as it happened on the road to Damascus (9:1-19); Paul's defense before a mob at the temple in Jerusalem (22:6-21); and Paul's defense before King Agrippa (26:12-18). Luke undoubtedly viewed Paul's transformation from legalistic Pharisee who persecuted Christians to sinner saved by grace who endured persecution to preach the gospel as a turning point in church history. The only other event in Acts that came close to its impact on the church was Peter's transformation regarding the acceptance of Gentiles in salvation (10:9-16; 11:5-10; 15:7-9).

In his testimony before the hostile crowd at the Jerusalem temple, Paul revealed two additional details about his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus: (1) the timing—it happened **about noon**; and (2) the intensity of the **light from heaven**. (Two similarly described details appear also in 26:13.) These two details taken together emphasize the miraculous nature of the event Paul had experienced. The encounter occurred at the brightest time of day, yet the heavenly light overshadowed even the sun's rays. The light was such that after his conversation with Jesus, Paul was not able to see and had

to be led into the city (22:11; see 9:8). Paul's temporary blindness left him only after his meeting with Ananias (22:13; see 9:17-18).

VERSE 7

I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’

The light from heaven was so intense that it caused Paul and his travel companions (see 26:14) to fall **to the ground**. He not only saw a blinding light but also **heard a voice** speaking directly to him, calling him by name. The name **Saul** was the Hebrew form by which he was called in most Jewish contexts. (He was called *Paul* in most Gentile contexts, which occupy a great deal of the latter half of Acts.) The double expression of the name signified emphasis and called for careful attention to the voice.

Paul's traveling companions saw the intense light. Did they also hear the voice Paul heard? In 9:7, Luke reported that they heard “the sound” but didn't see who was speaking. To the mob at the temple, Paul stated that his fellow travelers saw the light but “did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me” (22:9). Later to King Agrippa, Paul said that everyone in the group fell to the ground because of the light, but only he “heard a voice speaking to [him] in Aramaic” (26:14). The emphasis in each telling of the event was that while the light shone on all the travelers, the voice targeted just one person, Paul. Everyone else heard only an indistinct noise.

The question posed by the heavenly voice stopped Paul in his tracks. Jesus Christ knew who Paul was, where he was, and what he was doing at that precise moment. This wasn't an attack of guilty conscience. The Lord confronted Paul for **persecuting** Him! Persecuting Christians, whom Paul considered to be enemies of God, meant Paul himself was an enemy of God.

VERSE 8

“I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ “He said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.’

Paul immediately requested confirmation of the identity of the one speaking to him. The reply was to the point: **I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.** By saying it this way, Jesus again identified Himself with the persecuted church. Paul's actions directed against followers of the Way had been directed against Jesus as well.

The reference to Jesus' being *of Nazareth* emphasizes that the risen Lord was none other than the historical Jesus who was crucified and arose from the dead. Christians were not worshiping a vanquished pretender; they served a risen Savior, the Son of God who conquered sin and death.

Just as we might adjust the details of our stories for particular audiences, Paul did likewise in addressing the hostile crowd at the temple. He reported, for example, that once he identified that the voice speaking to him was Jesus Christ, Paul then asked what he should do. Jesus gave him specific instructions that included going into the city of Damascus and waiting to hear from a follower of Christ. That follower, a man named Ananias, was a devout Jewish Christian with a good reputation. Ananias would help Paul regain his sight and give him further understanding about his new life in Christ (22:9-14).

VERSE 15

since you will be a witness for him to all people of what you have seen and heard.

Ananias declared that God had acted with great grace toward Paul. God had chosen Paul to “know his will, to see the Righteous One, and to hear the words from his mouth” (22:14). Together, those facts signified that God had given Paul a new relationship with Him based on encountering Jesus Christ and obeying Him. Paul was once a persecutor of Christ, but now he was a Christ-follower chosen for great service as **a witness for him to all people**.

When the Lord first enlisted Ananias to go and help the man known for persecuting Christians, He told Ananias that Paul would one day carry the Lord’s name “to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites” (9:15). Paul emphasized this God-given mission to the crowd at the temple. He was now one of those who had **seen and heard** the risen Lord, and he had taken his place as an apostle—one sent to testify about the good news for all people in Christ.

VERSE 16

And now, why are you delaying? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

Paul further recounted that he had been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. While the form of the Greek word rendered **be baptized** could refer to self-baptism, it is better understood to mean “have yourself baptized.” Acts 9:18 indicates that Paul was baptized during Ananias’s visit immediately after regaining his sight. Thus, Ananias most likely was the one who baptized Paul.

Baptism in Jesus’ name differed in meaning from the baptism practiced by John the Baptist. John’s baptism focused on repentance in anticipation of the coming Messiah. Baptism in Jesus’ name testifies to the Messiah’s completed work. Jesus’ death and resurrection had made possible the ultimate cleansing from unrighteousness. By faith, the believer’s sins are washed away. Baptism is the first step of obedience in confessing one’s faith in Christ.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Who were some key people who helped you understand the gospel and come to faith in Jesus Christ? How would you describe your conversion to someone who has little to no background in church? What was the most memorable feature of your baptism?

NEW PURPOSE (Acts 22:17-21)

VERSES 17-18

“After I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him telling me, ‘Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’”

Paul now turned to the third and final part of his defense before the Jews in the temple complex. He described an event Luke did not include in the first account of Paul’s conversion. In Acts 9:22-30, Luke reported that Paul returned to Jerusalem after the Jews in Damascus threatened him with death. In Jerusalem, Paul sought to join with the believers there, but they were understandably still fearful of him. Only when Barnabas stood with Paul and vouched for his conversion did he gain acceptance among the Jerusalem believers. Paul then began speaking boldly in the Lord’s name and debating with Greek-speaking Jews in the city. This led to some of those Jews plotting to kill Paul, so the disciples sent him away to Caesarea.

Interestingly, Paul compressed his description of those events in 22:17. In fact, in his Letter to the Galatians, Paul stated that he had left Damascus and had spent some time in Arabia. Then he returned to Damascus at some point and only later—three years after his conversion—did he go to Jerusalem (see Gal. 1:17-18). In any case, when he arrived in Jerusalem, one of the things Paul did was to go to **the temple** to pray.

The accusation for which Paul had been detained and why he presently addressed the crowd was that he had supposedly dishonored the Jewish law and temple (21:27-29). However, Paul had consistently shown respect for those traditions, demonstrating when he first returned to Jerusalem as a believer that he still viewed the temple as God’s place of prayer.

Paul went on to recall that during his time of prayer he **fell into a trance** in which he received a message from God. The Greek word rendered

trance is the source of our English word *ecstasy*. Luke used the same word in describing Simon Peter's state of mind when God taught that disciple a lesson on including the Gentiles in the gospel (10:10; 11:5). For both Peter and Paul, the trances had prophetic dimensions; they were states of mind that reached far beyond their ordinary perception.

In his visionary state, Paul once again saw and heard the risen Lord. This time the message was a warning about the hostile reaction to Paul's **testimony** of Christ. In Damascus, Paul had started to fulfill his God-given mission of being a witness to all people. He had proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God (9:20) and argued convincingly that Jesus was the Messiah (9:22). In Jerusalem, Paul continued speaking boldly about Christ, but there were some Jews who were never going to accept Paul's testimony or stand by quietly while he (in their minds) dishonored Jewish traditions. Thus, Jesus commanded Paul to leave the city quickly. The urgency of this command fits well with Paul's statement in Galatians 1:18 that his visit to Jerusalem following his conversion lasted only fifteen days.

VERSE 19

"But I said, 'Lord, they know that in synagogue after synagogue I had those who believed in you imprisoned and beaten.'

Paul admitted that his initial reaction to the trance warning had been a protest. Paul felt confident that he of all people would be able to convince Jewish audiences of the gospel's validity. He stated two pieces of evidence to support his protest. First, he thought that the Jews living in Jerusalem would remember his previous passion in ridding Judaism of the gospel movement. He had been relentless, going into **synagogue after synagogue** to arrest, imprison, and beat **those who believed in** Jesus Christ. Paul argued to the Lord that if any believer had a reason to reach the Jews in Jerusalem with the gospel, he was that witness.

VERSE 20

And when the blood of your witness Stephen was being shed, I stood there giving approval and guarding the clothes of those who killed him.'

The second piece of evidence Paul presented to the Lord was his role in the death of **Stephen**. The words **blood of your witness ... being shed** echo the sacrificial language of the Old Testament. Moreover, the violent, sacrificial nature of Stephen's death was reminiscent of the Lord Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. The Greek word rendered *witness* is the basis

of our English word *martyr*. It was because of actions like Stephen's that the English term came to mean "one who holds and testifies to a belief at the cost of his or her life."

Paul admitted his culpability in Stephen's death. He might not have thrown a single stone, but he had **stood there giving approval and guarding the clothes of those who killed** Stephen. Paul's main point in his argument to the Lord was that the Jews would surely see the gospel's power and validity in his personal transformation.

VERSE 21

"He said to me, 'Go, because I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

At the end of Paul's protest, the Lord had not changed His mind. Further, the Lord had a bigger purpose in mind for Paul: he would become the apostle to **the Gentiles**. To the end of his life, Paul would never stop praying for the salvation of his own people, the Jews (see Rom. 10:1). However, the Lord had commanded him to **go** and take the gospel to distant lands filled with lost Gentile people groups. Paul obeyed that command.

REJECTION (Acts 22:22)

VERSE 22

They listened to him up to this point. Then they raised their voices, shouting, "Wipe this man off the face of the earth! He should not be allowed to live!"

At the mention of Paul's God-given mission to the Gentiles, the crowd in the temple courtyard erupted in bitter hostility. Their reactions were emotional, verbal, and physical. They screamed threats: Paul needed to be wiped off **the face of the earth**. He didn't deserve **to live**. They ripped off their cloaks and threw dirt in the air, both signs of utter disgust (22:23). Paul learned that the Lord had been right when He said that the Jews of Jerusalem would not accept Paul's testimony.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How has faith in Christ given you a heart for making disciples of all nations? To what extent has your county or state become more ethnically diverse over the past twenty years? What are some practical ways that your church shows a welcoming attitude toward people of various ethnicities?

ANSWERING CRITICS

The gospel demands a response of repentance and faith.

One of the most helpful classes I took as a seminary student was a course in apologetics. In this class we learned to explain Christian beliefs clearly as well as to understand and rebut arguments that people use to attack Christianity. We often discussed barriers—intellectual and otherwise—that hinder some people from following Christ. A foundational Scripture we used in the course was the apostle Peter’s admonition for Christians to always be ready “to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” and to do this with “gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15-16).

A member of our study group once told a story to illustrate the importance of practicing apologetics with gentleness and respect. That story, which stuck with me over the years, was about a young man who had become antagonistic against Christianity as a result of reading about the Crusades of medieval times. This young man, a college student, often brought up tales of atrocities the crusaders committed during those military campaigns as evidence of what he believed to be the hypocrisy and evil of Christianity. Other students, including most of the Christian students at the school, were unfamiliar with the antagonist’s sources and stories; thus, they could not refute the young man’s diatribe.

One day the young man confronted a Christian history major who had studied the Crusades extensively. The debate went badly for the antagonistic student. The Christian history major knew all of the young man’s arguments and crushed them with counterarguments for every claim. In a brash, condescending manner, the Christian dispatched every argument of the antagonistic student. The student withdrew, dejected and humiliated.

This story illustrated for our study group that by defending the faith arrogantly, we might win the debate but lose the opportunity to show someone the gospel of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ. We can find a wonderful biblical example of defending the faith in the right manner in this

session's Bible passage. The apostle Paul stood before a group that included two Roman rulers and explained the hope he had in Jesus Christ.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ACTS 23:23–26:32

The previous session focused on events that occurred during Paul's final visit to Jerusalem. Those events concluded with Paul in protective custody and being taken to Caesarea to appear at trial before the district governor, Felix. The governor then sent word back to Jerusalem, instructing the Jewish leaders to come to Caesarea to present their case against Paul (23:23–35).

Paul's hearing before Felix began five days later. The spokesman for the Jewish leaders, a lawyer named Tertullus [tuhr TUHL uhs], presented two charges against Paul. First, he accused Paul of being an agitator and ringleader of a sect that caused problems among Jews throughout the Roman Empire. Second, Tertullus charged Paul with trying to desecrate the Jerusalem temple. Other Jewish leaders also offered evidence in an attempt to corroborate Tertullus's charges (24:1–9).

Paul answered the charges by denying that he was a troublemaker and by affirming that he worshiped the God of Israel as a follower of the Way. He explained further that he had gone to the temple only twelve days before to complete a vow and to bring charitable gifts and offerings for his people. Paul then suggested that the real reason he was on trial was because of a doctrinal dispute among the Jews regarding the resurrection of the dead (24:10–21).

The governor refused to decide the case until he heard from the arresting commander in Jerusalem. That testimony evidently never happened. However, a few days later Governor Felix and his wife Drusilla, a Jew, brought Paul before them and listened as Paul spoke about faith in Jesus Christ. Felix became nervous as Paul spoke about the judgment to come, so he sent Paul away. The apostle remained in confinement in Caesarea for the next two years. He was still a prisoner when Rome deposed Felix for corruption and installed a new governor named Festus (24:22–27).

In a visit to Jerusalem, Festus received a delegation of Jewish leaders who sought to convince the ruler to summon Paul back to the city for trial. Unknown to Festus, the leaders' request was part of a plot to murder the apostle along the way. The governor insisted, however, that the hearing be held in Caesarea. Luke briefly summarized the hearing before Festus, which concluded with Paul's refusing to return to Jerusalem for trial but instead appealing to appear from Caesar's tribunal in Rome (25:1–12).

While awaiting his transfer to Rome, Paul was given the opportunity to present his defense before King Agrippa and the king's sister, Bernice, who were in Caesarea as guests of Festus. Paul knew that Agrippa was knowledgeable about Jewish customs and controversies, so he carefully described his background as a Pharisee, told about his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, and explained his God-given mission to preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. Agrippa was not persuaded to become a Christian; nevertheless, he was convinced that Paul had done nothing to deserve death. Agrippa told Festus that Paul could have been released were it not for the apostle's appeal to Caesar (25:13–26:32).

The verses for this session are drawn from Paul's final hearing in Caesarea before being transferred to Rome as a prisoner. Paul gave his testimony before an auditorium filled with royal officials, military commanders, and prominent men of the city (25:23). His primary audience, however, was just one person: King Herod Agrippa II.

King Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great, the king of Judea when Jesus was born. Agrippa II was born in AD 27 and was raised in the imperial city of Rome. At age twenty-one, he inherited the rule of a small kingdom upon the death of an uncle. By the middle of the first century, Agrippa had added the former territories of the tetrarch Herod Philip (see Luke 3:1) to his kingdom. The uncle whose small kingdom Agrippa inherited was also the husband of Agrippa's sister, Bernice. When the uncle died, Bernice came to live with her brother, the new king, in what one Jewish historian declared was an incestuous relationship. Festus enlisted Agrippa to decide what, if any, charges they should list against Paul at the trial in Rome.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE GOSPEL TOLD (Acts 26:19-23)

Paul followed a basic outline in his testimony before Agrippa. He began by talking about his former life as a devout Pharisee (26:4-11). Then he described the Damascus-road encounter that led to his becoming a follower of Christ (26:12-18), and finally he told about being arrested for simply doing what the Lord instructed him to do—preach the gospel and guide both Jews and Gentiles to repentance and faith in Christ (26:19-23).

VERSE 19

“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.

Paul opened his defense by showing genuine respect toward King Agrippa. He referred to the king as “very knowledgeable about all the Jewish customs and controversies” (26:3). This may indicate that Paul assumed Agrippa was aware of the Jewish leaders’ efforts to stamp out the Christian movement and perhaps even of Paul’s leading role in those efforts. For Paul, however, that antagonistic role had been abruptly reversed when he received a life-changing vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. The former persecutor of Christians became a champion of the gospel.

Paul described his response to his encounter with Christ in terms of obedience to God. He was **not disobedient to the heavenly vision**. The encounter had not been merely an internal, subjective experience but the physical voice of the risen Lord speaking in the Hebrew language (26:14). Thus, the ministry for which Paul was arrested did not come from his own initiative. Rather, it was an obedient response to a divine calling.

VERSE 20

Instead, I preached to those in Damascus first, and to those in Jerusalem and in all the region of Judea, and to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works worthy of repentance.

As evidence of his obedience to the Lord, Paul listed the groups to whom he had preached following the Damascus-road encounter. Since he was **in Damascus** when he was healed of temporary blindness and baptized, he began in that city, preaching about Jesus in the synagogues to astonished hearers (see 9:20). Some time later (see the discussion of timing on p. 117), Paul preached **in Jerusalem and in all the region of Judea**. This is likely a reference to Paul’s continued preaching in synagogues to predominantly Jewish audiences. However, Paul also preached **to the Gentiles** in these places, either in the marketplaces or in venues such as private homes or public lecture halls (see 19:8-10). His message everywhere was that people **should repent and turn to God, and do works worthy of repentance**.

The Greek word translated *worthy* can also mean “appropriate” or “fitting.” The English Standard Version renders the entire phrase as “performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.” The New International Version says “demonstrate their repentance by their deeds.” All of these translations remind us that salvation is by grace through faith alone. In other words, we are not saved by our works, but salvation leads to transformed living (see Eph. 2:8-10). Turning to God (repentance) and believing in Jesus result in the forgiveness of our sins through Christ’s atoning death. Paul was thus encouraging a lifestyle appropriate for one who had been saved by grace.

VERSE 21

For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and were trying to kill me.

The phrase **for this reason** (“for these causes,” KJV; “that is why,” NIV) ties the Jews’ action against Paul in the temple complex to his preaching the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. Two years prior to this time, the Jews had offered two accusations against Paul: first, that he had taught Gentiles to disrespect the law of Moses and Jewish traditions; second, that Paul had profaned the temple by bringing a Gentile into a forbidden area—a charge based on a misunderstanding (Acts 21:8). In his first appearance before Governor Festus two years later, Paul had argued that he had done nothing against the Jewish law or against the temple (25:8). Festus had found the Jewish charges to be no more than disagreements among various Jews about their religion and Jesus (25:18-19). In his defense before Agrippa, Paul did not mention the charge of profaning the temple since it was not a real issue.

VERSE 22

To this very day, I have had help from God, and I stand and testify to both small and great, saying nothing other than what the prophets and Moses said would take place—

In the recounting of his visionary encounter with Christ, Paul stated that the risen Lord had promised to rescue him “from [the Jewish] people and from the Gentiles” (25:17). Christ made good on that promise to Paul, delivering the apostle from a number of plots and efforts to kill him (see 9:23-25,29-30; 14:5-6,19-20). From the beginning of Paul’s ministry to the **very day** he stood before Festus and Agrippa, God had protected Paul, enabling him to complete his commission as a servant and witness of Jesus.

The phrase **to both small and great** could refer either to the social status or ages of Paul’s audiences. Indeed, the phrase well describes Paul’s overall ministry. He had preached in major cities such as Ephesus and Corinth but also had evangelized in villages such as Lystra. The gospel of Jesus Christ knew no geographical or social boundaries; Paul preached the gospel to all groups of people without discrimination.

Paul reminded King Agrippa that the message he preached was **nothing other than what the prophets and Moses said would take place**. The gospel did not invalidate the law; it fulfilled it (Matt. 5:17). Careful readers of the Book of Acts are familiar with this claim already. Peter made the same point on the Day of Pentecost by using numerous Old Testament quotations in his speech (see Acts 2:14-36). Further, when Paul preached in

the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia (13:16-41), he also quoted a series of Old Testament passages to demonstrate how the rulers in Jerusalem had not listened to the voices of the prophets related to Jesus. In his subsequent defense before Felix, Paul affirmed that he believed “everything that is in accordance with the law and written in the prophets” (24:14). This emphasis on God’s fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in Jesus went back to Christ Himself. In the risen Jesus’ conversation with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Christ reminded them that everything written about Him in the law and the prophets must be fulfilled (Luke 24:27).

VERSE 23

that the Messiah must suffer, and that, as the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light to our people and to the Gentiles.”

The message found in the law and the prophets was that **the Messiah must suffer** and die, that He then would **rise from the dead**, and that God’s **light** (salvation) would be proclaimed to both Jews (**our people**) and **the Gentiles**. When Jesus met with His disciples in the upper room after His resurrection, He reminded them that it had been written that the Messiah must suffer, must rise from the dead, and that proclamation of repentance for forgiveness of sin must be proclaimed (see Luke 24:46-47). The early Christians often turned to the Book of Isaiah to understand the necessity of a suffering Messiah. The Ethiopian official had been reading and puzzling over Isaiah 53:7-8 when Philip met the official on the road to Gaza and explained the gospel to him from that scripture (see Acts 8:30-35).

The reference to the proclamation of *light* echoes the prophet Isaiah as well. Isaiah had declared that those who walk in spiritual darkness would one day see a great light dawning on the nations in the birth of a Child, the Son of God (Isa. 9:2,6). Isaiah further stated that God’s messianic Servant would be “a light for the nations” and His “salvation to the ends of the earth” (49:6). Thus, Paul’s proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah was in line with the law, the Old Testament prophets, and the early church’s preaching. Paul’s understanding of God’s fulfilled promises added authority to his presentation to King Agrippa.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Messiah” on pages 1087–1092 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does it mean to you that Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets? How has Jesus been a light of salvation to you?

OBJECTION REBUFFED (Acts 26:24-26)

VERSE 24

As he was saying these things in his defense, Festus exclaimed in a loud voice, “You’re out of your mind, Paul! Too much study is driving you mad.”

When Paul reached the point of his **defense** in which he expressed the central truths of the gospel, Festus interrupted him **in a loud voice**. He accused the apostle of being insane. The Greek verb rendered **you’re out of your mind** (“thou art beside thyself,” KJV) literally describes a person who has no self-control. Luke used a different form of the same verb in 26:11 to describe Paul’s mindless rage against Christians before his conversion. In 1 Corinthians 14:23, Paul used the term to describe what outsiders would think if believers gathered in worship all spoke in tongues at the same time.

Festus attributed Paul’s supposed madness to **too much study** (“great learning” ESV, NIV). The Greek word rendered *study* is the basis of our English word *grammar*. It could refer either to a single letter of the alphabet or an entire written book. Festus may have been referring to Paul’s study of the Old Testament, although the Greek word could refer to learning in general. In any case, Festus believed that Paul had been so involved in his books and learning that he had lost touch with the real world.

VERSE 25

But Paul replied, “I’m not out of my mind, most excellent Festus. On the contrary, I’m speaking words of truth and good judgment.

Luke did not describe the emotional tone of Festus’s interruption. Was the ruler angry or merely frustrated? Was his reference to Paul’s great learning a complement or an insult? Luke did not specify. Whatever the tone of the accusation, Paul answered Festus respectfully, addressing him as **most excellent** (KJV, “most noble”). This title occurs four times in the Greek New Testament, with all instances appearing in Luke’s writings—once in the Third Gospel (Luke 1:3) and three times in the Book of Acts (23:26; 24:3; 26:25).

Paul calmly denied Festus’s accusation and countered by reminding the ruler that both previously and now he had spoken **words of truth and good judgment**. In Paul’s previous defense before Felix, the Jewish leaders had not been able to offer any evidence to support the charges they had brought against Paul (24:13). Many of those who joined in the accusations against Paul believed as he did in the truth of the resurrection (24:15).

Second, Paul’s words showed *good judgment*. This Greek term referred to a soundness of mind, the practice of prudence. The word was frequently used

as the opposite of the Greek term rendered “out of your mind” in Acts 26:24. The Greek word translated **I’m speaking** emphasizes the sound of words as well as their content. Paul’s words were not only true but also demonstrated reasonableness and self-control.

VERSE 26

For the king knows about these matters, and I can speak boldly to him. For I am convinced that none of these things has escaped his notice, since this was not done in a corner.

The primary purpose of this meeting had been for King Agrippa to hear Paul’s defense (25:22), and Paul had addressed Agrippa throughout his speech (26:2,7,13,19). After Festus’s brief interruption, Paul turned again to King Agrippa. Although Festus might attribute Paul’s words to mental instability, Agrippa would **know about these matters**. Paul felt confident that Agrippa understood the reasonableness of his argument. Although the king had spent much of his early life in Rome, he had returned to the Jewish homeland around AD 50. Moreover, he had maintained an interest in the developments among the Jews.

King Agrippa’s involvement in Jewish affairs made Paul confident that his argument was not new information for the king. The events related to Jesus’ ministry and crucifixion had become common knowledge in that area, as were the reports of Jesus’ resurrection. The same could be said for the church’s gospel proclamation. The words **this was not done in a corner** could mean that Christians were known not to be a secret sect. That is, they didn’t meet in secret or try to avoid public scrutiny. Another possible meaning of the words was that the gospel events did not happen in an insignificant way with little or no impact on the larger world. Paul may have intended both meanings. For these reasons, he was confident that none of the events had escaped King Agrippa’s notice.

Paul spoke **boldly** (“freely,” NIV) to Agrippa. The Greek term literally means “to express oneself freely, openly, and without fear.” We would do well to follow Paul’s witnessing example of boldness tempered with respect.

EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you told someone about Jesus using boldness tempered with respect? In what ways did you demonstrate these two qualities? How did that person respond?

INVITATION GIVEN (Acts 26:27-29)

VERSE 27

King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you believe.”

Paul shifted his direction slightly, not waiting for a response to his claim concerning Agrippa's knowledge of Jewish affairs. Addressing the king directly, Paul both posed and answered a question about Agrippa's belief. The words **do you believe the prophets** made the matter personal for Agrippa. If the king believed that God spoke through the prophets—which Paul was sure that the king did believe—then it was reasonable for Agrippa to believe that God fulfilled the promises given to the Old Testament prophets by sending His Messiah. Paul was not suggesting that Agrippa had accepted the Christian message that the resurrected Jesus was God's Messiah. Rather, he was arguing that belief in the veracity of the Old Testament prophets was a first step in understanding what God had done in Jesus Christ (see Acts 3:18-20).

Ever the evangelist, Paul shifted roles. No longer was King Agrippa providing information to Festus that might be helpful to Paul's situation. At this point, Paul was offering to Agrippa the opportunity to take the next logical step, to move from one still waiting for God's Messiah to one who believed in Jesus as that Messiah.

VERSE 28

Agrippa said to Paul, “Are you going to persuade me to become a Christian so easily?”

Some Bible commentators have suggested that Agrippa was faced with a dilemma. If he answered Paul's question about believing the prophets with a yes, he might be identified with the followers of the Way. This would have put him at odds with the Jews and possibly with Festus. On the other hand, answering that he did not believe the prophets also could have put him at odds with the Jews. Thus, Agrippa evaded Paul's question by asking one of his own.

The Greek phrase translated **so easily** (“in a short time,” ESV) is ambiguous; it can refer to the effort expended or the time involved. The King James Version's rendering, “almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” probably should not be understood as an indication that Agrippa was quite close to expressing his faith in Jesus. Paul's response in the subsequent verse makes such an understanding less likely.

The Greek word rendered **Christian** occurs only in Acts 11:26 and this verse in the Book of Acts. In both cases, non-believers spoke the title to

describe followers of the Way. The only other occurrence of the word in the New Testament is found in 1 Peter 4:16.

VERSE 29

“I wish before God,” replied Paul, “that whether easily or with difficulty, not only you but all who listen to me today might become as I am—except for these chains.”

Agrippa’s response to Paul’s question indicated that the king had no interest in continuing the conversation Paul had initiated. However, Paul countered with one more evangelistic appeal by playing off of Agrippa’s response. Bible translators typically render the phrase **whether easily or with difficulty** (“almost, and altogether as I am,” KJV; “whether short or long,” ESV; “short time or long,” NIV) in line with the way they translated the previous verse. The level of difficulty or the length of time that Agrippa would need to respond to the gospel was of no concern to Paul. His **wish before God**, his heart’s prayer, was that Agrippa would believe the prophets and accept God’s Messiah. Paul widened his appeal to all those who were present that day. Paul had primarily focused on Agrippa, but he was aware that God might have been working in other hearts that day as well.

Festus accused Paul of being out of his mind, a charge Paul refuted. Then Paul challenged those present to become as he was. His zeal to obey God had been misdirected until he met the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. He now desired for every person in the room to have that same life-changing encounter.

Paul’s only qualification was that new converts to the faith would not have to experience his **chains**. Paul may have been using the term *chains* figuratively. On the other hand, he knew what it was like to be bound in literal chains (Acts 16:25-26). If Paul was indeed chained as he spoke to King Agrippa, he may have gestured toward his shackles. In any case, the king, the governor, and Bernice got to their feet, signaling the interview was over. Although this had not been a trial, the verdict of all three was that Paul was innocent and should have been released.

EXPLORE FURTHER

If you had an audience with a high-ranking public official, how likely would you be to bring spiritual matters into the conversation? Explain. How does Paul’s testimony before Festus and Agrippa challenge you to be a bold witness for Christ in all circumstances?

ALWAYS ON MISSION

The gospel message is for all people; some will believe, but others will not.

Quarterback Drew Brees enjoys iconic status among many citizens of New Orleans. That is true in part because he led the city's professional football team to a Super Bowl championship on February 7, 2010. In July of that same year, Brees published a biographical account of his journey from disappointment on draft day in 2001 to being named the most valuable player in New Orleans's Super Bowl win almost a decade later.

Around the midpoint of that ten-year journey, Brees, then playing for another NFL team, suffered what many people thought was a career-ending injury—a severe cartilage tear in the shoulder of his throwing arm. The injury required major surgery followed by intensive rehab. Adding insult to injury, the team he played for at the time signed another star quarterback, essentially forcing Brees to look for a new team that might take a chance on a comeback player. New Orleans took that risk, and some five years later Brees stood on the championship platform with his new team.

Brees's memoir of those experiences is titled *Coming Back Stronger: Unleashing the Hidden Power of Adversity*. That same title might well apply to the biblical account of the apostle Paul's journey from persecutor of Christians in Jerusalem to devoted follower and proclaimer of Christ in the imperial city of Rome. The apostle's journey had been fraught with adversity. In fact, Paul was in Rome as a prisoner for the sake of Christ when Luke penned the account we know today as the Book of Acts.

In this closing session of our study in Acts, Paul's journey of faith encourages us to keep on sharing the gospel with others. No matter what kinds of adversity may erupt in our lives, we can find ways in the midst of it to talk about Jesus. At the same time, we know that some will respond positively to our witness and others will not. Our mission and privilege as believers is to keep on telling others about the Savior.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ACTS 27:1–28:31

The final two chapters of Acts cover Paul’s journey as a prisoner by ship from Caesarea to Italy—with some incidents along the way (27:1–28:16)—and at least two years under house arrest in Rome while the apostle awaited trial before Caesar’s tribunal (28:17–31). Multiple occurrences of the pronoun *we* in these chapters indicate that Luke accompanied Paul on the journey to Rome. Luke’s presence with Paul in Rome is further supported by the inclusion of Luke’s name in the Letter to the Colossians, an epistle Paul wrote during his time of imprisonment in Rome (see Col. 4:14).

Acts 27 consists mainly of the account of a shipwreck that happened to the ship transporting Paul to Rome. While sailing around the island of Crete, the ship got caught in adverse winds that drove it away from the island and into the open sea in the midst of a severe storm. The ship drifted westward for fourteen days; the crew and passengers kept throwing cargo (including their grain stores) overboard in hopes that the lighter vessel would drift toward land and run aground. Throughout the crisis, God continued to assure Paul that he would stand before Caesar and all the ship’s passengers and crew would survive (27:22–24). Finally, the ship did run aground on the island of Malta and broke apart. As Paul had promised, “everyone safely reached the shore” (27:44).

After two incidents on Malta that further demonstrated God’s providential care for Paul, the prisoner and his guard (plus Luke) boarded another ship and sailed to Italy. Three months later, Paul was delivered to Rome, where officials allowed him to live in a house along with his guard (28:11–16). He remained in that situation for at least two years (28:30).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE JOURNEY (Acts 28:17-20)

VERSE 17

After three days he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had gathered he said to them: “Brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

When Paul arrived in Rome, arrangements apparently had already been made for his housing. Three statements in 28:17 reveal Paul's living arrangements in the city. First, he was allowed to stay in private, rented lodging (Acts 28:16,30). Second, he was guarded by a single soldier who stayed in the house with Paul (28:16). Third, he was able to receive guests in his lodging (28:17,23,30). These relaxed conditions of Paul's imprisonment likely resulted from the weakness of the case against him. Festus's documentation may have indicated this weakness and that Paul was not a threat.

Soon after getting established in his lodging, Paul **called together the leaders** ("the chief," KJV) **of the Jews**. The Greek word rendered *leaders* can also mean "first" or "chief." Some Bible scholars have suggested that from twenty to fifty thousand Jews lived in Rome at this time. The prominent Jews that Paul summoned may have been leaders of the various synagogues in the city. Inscriptions found in Rome that date back to this period contain the names of at least eleven synagogues in the city.

Paul took the initiative to meet these Jewish leaders. He wanted them to hear his story personally and not be swayed by hearsay or false reports from Jerusalem. He addressed the assembled Jews as **brothers**, just as he had previously addressed the crowd in the temple (see 22:1). He then summarized the events and false charges that led to his presence in Rome as a prisoner awaiting trial.

Paul assured the Jewish leaders he had **done nothing against** either the people of Israel or ancient Jewish **customs**. In this, the apostle was attempting to preempt the kinds of charges levied against him in Jerusalem that he taught "everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place" (21:28). In none of Paul's appearances before both Jewish and Roman officials had any evidence been presented to support that allegation (25:7).

Paul next summarized his encounter with the Roman soldiers in the temple area. The soldiers rescued Paul from the violent attack launched against him by Jews. Later the soldiers had to rescue Paul again as he appeared before the Sanhedrin, out of fear that the Jewish leaders would kill him (23:10).

VERSE 18

After they examined me, they wanted to release me, since there was no reason for the death penalty in my case.

Although Luke did not record an explicit statement by a Roman official who expressed a desire **to release** Paul, it was logical for the apostle to draw that conclusion. The Roman centurion Lysias stated in his letter to Governor Felix that he had found "no charge that merited death or imprisonment" (23:29). Lysias's only reason for sending Paul to Caesarea had been to outmaneuver

a Jewish plot to kill Paul (23:30). Felix's successor Festus, as well as King Agrippa and his sister Bernice, had all reached the same conclusion about Paul: "This man is not doing anything to deserve death or imprisonment" (26:31). In fact, Agrippa was prepared to recommend Paul's release if the apostle had not already appealed to Caesar (26:32).

VERSE 19

Because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar; even though I had no charge to bring against my people.

The word translated **objected** can also mean "to speak against, contradict, or oppose." We can see the Jewish leaders' opposition to Paul throughout this account. The Jews had tried to kill Paul more than once. Because of their opposition and plots, **Paul compelled to appeal** his case to Rome and away from Jerusalem.

At this point, Paul refuted a possible negative motivation for his appeal to Caesar. Paul assured his listeners that he had not appealed to Rome as a way of retaliating against the Jews in his homeland. He would not be bringing countercharges against his own people, despite the ferocity of their opposition against him.

VERSE 20

For this reason I've asked to see you and speak to you. In fact, it is for the hope of Israel that I'm wearing this chain."

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, things had gone badly very quickly. Just two days after arriving in Jerusalem (21:17,26), Paul had been falsely accused of profaning the temple and needed to be rescued by Roman soldiers. Hoping for a different outcome in Rome, Paul wanted the Jewish leaders there to hear directly from him about what had happened and why he was a Roman prisoner.

Rather than being an enemy of the Jewish people, Paul was in this situation as the direct result of his belief in **the hope of Israel**. When he had appeared before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, Paul argued that he was on trial "because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead" (23:6). Before Felix the governor, Paul likewise had contended that his hope was based on the resurrection (24:15). Before Festus and King Agrippa, Paul described his hope as "what God promised to our ancestors, the promise our twelve tribes hope to reach as they earnestly serve him night and day" (26:6-7). In other words, Paul's hope was tied directly to the risen Messiah, Jesus.

God had told Ananias that Paul would proclaim the Lord's name to "Gentiles, kings, and the Israelites" (9:15). God had kept His promise,

although perhaps not in the way Paul envisioned. His situation as a Roman prisoner positioned him to do everything God had promised he would do.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Appeal to Caesar” on page 90 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How can a believer balance trust in God’s providential care with taking advantage of human systems such as the right of appeal?

THE SEEKERS (Acts 28:21-24)

VERSE 21

Then they said to him, “We haven’t received any letters about you from Judea. None of the brothers has come and reported or spoken anything evil about you.

The Jewish leaders professed to have no knowledge about Paul’s problems with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Bible scholars have suggested two possible reasons for this lack of information. First, it is possible that Paul arrived in Rome as a prisoner before any representatives from Jerusalem or **letters** of accusation arrived. Given that Paul had spent two years in prison in Caesarea, ample time had passed for word of Paul’s situation to reach Rome. However, until the apostle appealed to Caesar, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem would have had no reason for sending a message about Paul to their counterparts in Rome.

Second, Paul’s accusers may have simply decided to drop their pursuit of the apostle rather than have to journey to Rome and appear before Caesar. After all, the Jewish leaders were unable to obtain a conviction under Felix or Festus. Appearing before Caesar with no real evidence against Paul could end badly for the accusers.

VERSE 22

But we want to hear what your views are, since we know that people everywhere are speaking against this sect.”

While the Jewish leaders in Rome were uninformed about Paul’s case, they were aware of the Christian movement. They regarded Christians as a **sect** that **people everywhere** were **speaking against**. They wanted to hear Paul’s **views** about followers of the Way.

We know from Paul's Letter to the Romans, written from Corinth around AD 57, that the church was already well established in Rome by the time the apostle came there as a prisoner. Thus, it is difficult to imagine that Jewish leaders in Rome had no knowledge of or contact with Christians already. Some Bible commentators have suggested that the Jewish leaders were being diplomatic, if not clever, in wanting to hear what Paul thought before offering their own views about Christianity.

The Jewish leaders referred to Christians as a *sect*. The Greek term appears only nine times in the New Testament (six times in Acts) and refers to a group of people who hold a distinctive set of beliefs. The word appears in Acts 5:17 and 15:5 to refer to the Sadducees and Pharisees, respectively. Thus, the word itself probably did not have a negative connotation. On the other hand, the Jewish leaders in Rome were aware that Christians as a group with distinctive beliefs were spoken against in many places.

VERSE 23

After arranging a day with him, many came to him at his lodging. From dawn to dusk he expounded and testified about the kingdom of God. He tried to persuade them about Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets.

Arrangements were made for a second meeting between Paul and the Jews in Rome. Luke gave no indication of the length of time between the first and second meetings; neither did he indicate on what day of the week the second meeting occurred. Some Bible commentators have suggested that since the meeting lasted **from dawn to dusk** ("from morning till evening," KJV, ESV, NIV), it may have occurred on a Sabbath, when the Jews would not have been working.

The Greek word translated **many** ("greater numbers," ESV; "even larger numbers," NIV) is comparative; thus, it indicates this group was larger than the first group. The reference could be either to a larger number of Jewish leaders or to the inclusion of other Roman Jews. Since Paul was not allowed to leave his house, the group **came to him at his lodging**.

The Greek word rendered **expounded** ("explaining," NIV) appears in Acts 11:4 to describe Peter's explanation of the events that occurred in connection with the conversions of Cornelius and his family. The term also appears in 18:26 to describe Priscilla and Aquila's instruction to Apollos. The content of Paul's discourse to the Jews in Rome centered on **the kingdom of God**. In particular, the apostle sought to **persuade** his hearers **about Jesus**.

In the opening verses of Acts, Luke reported that during the forty days between Jesus' resurrection and His ascension, the Lord presented to the

disciples proof of His resurrection and taught them about the kingdom of God (1:3). In Samaria, Philip had “proclaimed the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (8:12). In Ephesus, Paul had tried to persuade the Jews in the synagogue about the things of the kingdom of God (19:8). Indeed, the final words Luke penned in the Book of Acts are that Paul kept on “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:31).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Kingdom of God” on pages 964–966 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you explain to a new believer what the kingdom of God involves? What is the connection between Jesus Christ and God’s kingdom?

The Jews believed that one day God would restore a triumphant political kingdom that was linked historically to King David. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, His disciples had asked, “Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?” (Acts 1:6). In response, Jesus redirected their expectations to the worldwide proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit (1:8). Luke’s message in Acts from start to finish is that God was restoring His kingdom in Jesus. As was his custom with a Jewish audience, Paul argued his case from the Old Testament (**from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets**). Luke provided only a summary of Paul’s teaching here, but Paul probably followed the same pattern he had followed in his synagogue sermon in Antioch of Pisidia (see 13:16–41).

VERSE 24

Some were persuaded by what he said, but others did not believe.

Paul’s presentation met with the same response that the apostle often received from his sermons: a divided response. Paul had sought to convince his audience about Jesus’ being the promised Messiah. At the end of the day, **some were persuaded** by his message. These listeners responded as Paul hoped they would. They believed his arguments from Scripture about Jesus and God’s kingdom. Did they become Christians? Some Bible commentators caution that the term *persuaded* may refer only to a mental assent that Paul had made a strong case for his view of Jesus. On the other hand, Luke used the same Greek word to describe the obedient response of hearers in Thessalonica who then joined with Paul and Silas as followers of Christ (see 17:4).

Others in the group in Rome **did not believe**. This unbelieving response to gospel proclamation was not unusual then; neither is it unexpected today. Those who are called to share the gospel with others—basically, all believers—cannot believe for our hearers. We must be faithful to carry out our mission as witnesses, but salvation will always remain a work that only God can do in the repentant hearts of those who respond to Him in faith.

THE RESPONSE (Acts 28:25-28)

VERSES 25-26

Disagreeing among themselves, they began to leave after Paul made one statement: “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah when he said, Go to these people and say: You will always be listening, but never understanding; and you will always be looking, but never perceiving.

The different responses among the Roman Jews led to a disagreement. The Greek word translated **disagreeing** is found only here in the New Testament. It refers to a lack of harmony in sounds and in personal relationships. In other words, the meeting began to break up and people began to leave when Paul offered one last text from Scripture. Paul attributed the words to the Holy Spirit’s speaking **through the prophet Isaiah**. The Bible may have been penned by inspired human writers, but it was (and is) to be received and treasured as the very Word of God.

The Scripture that Paul quoted came from Isaiah 6:9-10. This prophetic statement appears not only here in Acts but also in all four Gospels. In the first three Gospels, the quotation was used to explain why Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables (Matt. 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10). In John’s Gospel, the quotation appears at a pivotal point in Jesus’ ministry, indicating why many people rejected the Lord’s message in spite of the many signs Jesus performed (John 12:40).

The quotation in its Old Testament context comes at the end of Isaiah’s call experience in the temple. God gave Isaiah the difficult task of proclaiming His message to a people whom God knew would not heed it. The problem was not with Isaiah’s message but with the people’s stubborn unbelief. Nevertheless, God told Isaiah to keep on proclaiming the message (Isa. 6:11) with the knowledge that some hearers—a remnant—would respond in faith (6:13). In a similar way, Paul encountered both rejection and belief, but he remained faithful to God’s commission to preach the gospel. The Book of Acts ends with Paul still carrying out that mission even while a prisoner in Rome.

VERSE 27

For the hearts of these people have grown callous, their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.

God described the people's problem of unbelief in relationship to three sensory organs: **hearts, ears, and eyes**. People of old viewed the heart as the center of the will, similar to the modern concept of the mind. In each case, these organs did not function spiritually in unbelievers. Their **callous** hearts made them unreceptive to the gospel. Their ears were **hard of hearing**; they could not perceive the truth. Their closed eyes refused to see what God was doing in the world. God's intention was that His people would see, hear, and understand, so they might be converted and healed.

VERSE 28

Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”

Paul again announced a redirection in his mission—away from focusing his proclamation on the Jews to focusing on preaching to Gentiles. Some Bible students find in this passage the apostle's rejection of the Jewish people, but that is not the case. In most situations during Paul's missionary journeys, some Jews accepted Paul's message. Further, in Rome Paul continued to welcome “all who visited him” (28:30); this number likely included Jewish visitors. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul explained that God had not rejected Israel completely. Rather, God would use the Jews' temporary rejection of Jesus to bring salvation to the Gentiles. He wrote, “A partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:25b-26a).

EXPLORE FURTHER

How does the Holy Spirit help believers stay encouraged about witnessing even when some people respond with rejection? What promises do the Scriptures offer to those who are committed to sharing the gospel with others? How have these studies in Acts better prepared you for sharing the gospel in today's world?

Paul's Missionary Journeys



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Acts 13–28

As you study the Book of Acts, you will notice that the apostles were certain the risen Jesus had called, commissioned, and empowered them. Jesus was still at work through them. It is clear that no follower of Christ in the Book of Acts thought of Jesus as dead or gone. He was—and is—alive and at work through His church. Jesus' ascension into heaven did not mark His departure, but only a change in the manner by which He performs His earthly ministry. Acts is the continuing story of what Jesus is doing. He is still at work advancing His kingdom through His church. The work of getting the gospel to the ends of the earth is not finished. Our role in the story is clear. Live in the power of the Spirit, bear witness to Christ, and watch what our God does through the obedience of His people!



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