



# LIFE BY DESIGN

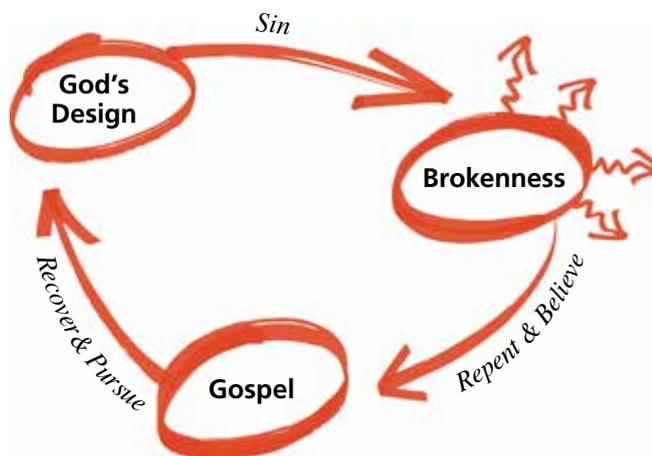
**We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make LIFE work.**

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 WRITERS

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ADULT LEADER GUIDE

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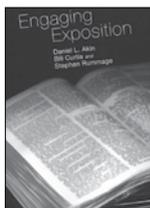
## A WORD FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR



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 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) will make its way to Rome (chap. 28). What started with the Jews will make its way to the Gentiles. What started with the focus on Peter (chaps. 1–12) will conclude with the focus on Paul (chaps. 13–28). The Holy Spirit will direct every step. The Lord Jesus will be exalted at every turn. The gospel will go forth in unstoppable power.

Acts is the history book of the New Testament. It provides vital and important information of the early church. There are so many valuable lessons we learn as we travel through its twenty-eight chapters. Several stand out. 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 persons to do extraordinary works that reveal His greatness and glory. Fourth, the gospel is a compelling message that demands a response. Neutrality is not an option. Fifth, the work of getting the gospel of the kingdom to the ends 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 our God does through the obedience of His people!

### ***Danny Akin***



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# WORD WISE

Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

**Agrippa** [uh GRIP uh]—the last ruler of the Herodian dynasty; heard Paul’s defense in Acts 26; known as Agrippa II; son of Agrippa I (who had James killed and Peter imprisoned, Acts 12:1) and great-grandson of Herod the Great (who ruled at the time of Jesus’ birth, Matt. 2:1)

**Antioch** [AN tih ahk]—the name of two cities in Acts: Antioch of Syria, where the church set aside Paul and Barnabas for missionary work (Acts 11:19-26; 13:1), and Antioch of Pisidia in Asia Minor, where Paul preached on his first missionary journey (13:14)

**Areopagus** [ehr ih AHP uh guhs]—also known as Mar’s Hill, a rocky hill near the Acropolis in Athens; also refers to the council that met on this hill; site of Paul’s speech in Athens (Acts 17:19)

**Cilicia** [sih LISH ih uh]—region in southeastern Asia Minor, what is now modern-day Turkey; its most important city was Tarsus, the birthplace of Paul

**Damaris** [DAM uh riss]—a woman in Athens who became a Christian following Paul’s speech at the Areopagus (Acts 17:34)

**Derbe** [DUHR bih]—city in the Galatian province of Asia Minor; Paul evangelized there on his first missionary journey (Acts 14:6) and returned there again on second and possibly third journeys (16:1; 18:23)

**Dionysius** [DIGH oh NISH ih uhs]—man in Athens who became a Christian following Paul’s speech; a member of the Areopagus council (Acts 17:34)

**Gamaliel** [guh MAY lih uhl]—a Pharisee and member of the Jewish Sanhedrin; advised the Sanhedrin not to condemn to death Jesus’ apostles (Acts 5:34); Paul’s teacher (22:3)

**Iconium** [igh KOH nih uhm]—city in eastern Asia Minor visited by Paul and Barnabas during their first missionary journey; they were persecuted there (Acts 14:1-2; 2 Tim. 3:11)

**Lystra** [LISS truh]—city in eastern Asia Minor visited by Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey; Paul and Barnabas were mistaken as gods there (Acts 14:8-18); Paul was stoned there (14:19); home of Timothy

**Pamphylia** [pam FIL ih uh]—a province in Asia Minor in what is now southern Turkey; one of the chief cities was Perga, where John Mark left Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:13)

# BIBLE READING PLAN

## DECEMBER

- 1. Acts 13:1-3
- 2. Acts 13:4-12
- 3. Acts 13:13-15
- 4. Acts 13:16-25
- 5. Acts 13:26-33
- 6. Acts 13:34-41
- 7. Acts 13:42-47
- 8. Acts 13:48-52
- 9. Acts 14:1-7
- 10. Acts 14:8-13
- 11. Acts 14:14-20
- 12. Acts 14:21-23
- 13. Acts 14:24-28
- 14. Acts 15:1-5
- 15. Acts 15:6-11
- 16. Acts 15:12-21
- 17. Acts 15:22-29
- 18. Acts 15:30-35
- 19. Acts 15:36-41
- 20. Acts 16:1-5
- 21. Acts 16:6-10
- 22. Acts 16:11-15
- 23. Acts 16:16-24
- 24. Acts 16:25-34
- 25. Acts 16:35-40
- 26. Acts 17:1-4
- 27. Acts 17:5-9
- 28. Acts 17:10-15
- 29. Acts 17:16-21
- 30. Acts 17:22-29
- 31. Acts 17:30-34

## JANUARY

- 1. Acts 18:1-4
- 2. Acts 18:5-8
- 3. Acts 18:9-17
- 4. Acts 18:18-23
- 5. Acts 18:24-28
- 6. Acts 19:1-7
- 7. Acts 19:8-10
- 8. Acts 19:11-17
- 9. Acts 19:18-22
- 10. Acts 19:23-27
- 11. Acts 19:28-34
- 12. Acts 19:35-41
- 13. Acts 20:1-6
- 14. Acts 20:7-12
- 15. Acts 20:13-16
- 16. Acts 20:17-24
- 17. Acts 20:25-31
- 18. Acts 20:32-38
- 19. Acts 21:1-6
- 20. Acts 21:7-14
- 21. Acts 21:15-25
- 22. Acts 21:26-30
- 23. Acts 21:31-36
- 24. Acts 21:37-40
- 25. Acts 22:1-10
- 26. Acts 22:11-16
- 27. Acts 22:17-22
- 28. Acts 22:23-30
- 29. Acts 23:1-5
- 30. Acts 23:6-11
- 31. Acts 23:12-18

## FEBRUARY

- 1. Acts 23:19-24
- 2. Acts 23:25-35
- 3. Acts 24:1-9
- 4. Acts 24:10-14
- 5. Acts 24:15-21
- 6. Acts 24:22-27
- 7. Acts 25:1-5
- 8. Acts 25:6-12
- 9. Acts 25:13-22
- 10. Acts 25:23-27
- 11. Acts 26:1-7
- 12. Acts 26:8-11
- 13. Acts 26:12-18
- 14. Acts 26:19-23
- 15. Acts 26:24-32
- 16. Acts 27:1-6
- 17. Acts 27:7-12
- 18. Acts 27:13-20
- 19. Acts 27:21-26
- 20. Acts 27:27-38
- 21. Acts 27:39-44
- 22. Acts 28:1-6
- 23. Acts 28:7-10
- 24. Acts 28:11-16
- 25. Acts 28:17-22
- 26. Acts 28:23-24
- 27. Acts 28:25-29
- 28. Acts 28:30-31



# USING THIS GUIDE TO LEAD

## » PRIOR TO THE GROUP TIME

### 1. Study the core passage.

Read *Understand the Context* to get a clear picture of how the core passage connects to the whole. Use *Explore the Text* to gain an understanding of the passage. Consult a study Bible like the *HCSB Study Bible* (also available online at [mywsb.com](http://mywsb.com)) and a Bible commentary like *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available at [lifeway.com/explorethebible](http://lifeway.com/explorethebible) in both print and digital formats) to gain additional insight into the passage. Seek to define key words, phrases, places, and actions taken. Record ideas and insights gleaned from your personal study. Write a summary of the truths you discovered using the statement printed under the session title as a starting place.

**TIP:** Start preparing early. Life happens, and it tends to happen closer to times we are scheduled to lead a Bible study group.

### 2. Create a group time plan.

- Review *First Thoughts* for the session to identify a direction for the session and why that session is important to today's adults.
- Review the suggestions included in *Lead Group Bible Study*, identifying the suggestions you believe will work best with your group.
- Consider ways of incorporating a Bible Skill into the study, either following the suggestion given (see shaded box in each session) or by developing your own idea.
- Consult *QuickSource* (available from [lifeway.com/explorethebible](http://lifeway.com/explorethebible)) and the *Explore the Bible* blog ([blog.lifeway.com/explorethebible/adults/leaderextras](http://blog.lifeway.com/explorethebible/adults/leaderextras)) for additional questions and group time activities.
- Visit the *Explore the Bible Ministry Grid* page ([ministrygrid.com/web/explorethebible](http://ministrygrid.com/web/explorethebible)) for additional ideas and insights.
- Review the *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* items suggested. Determine how to best use the items in your group's setting. Selected items are also available as reproducible masters on the CD-ROM included in the *Explore the Bible Leader Pack*.

### 3. Gather your resources.

Use the list in *Gather the Following Items* list on the first page of each session as a starting place. Make sure you have everything you need to lead the group time using the plan you created. Make sure you have additional copies of *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* for anticipated guests.

**TIP:** If you plan to use the Suggested Music Idea and your small group meets with other groups prior to the study time, consider incorporating the music activity into the large group time.

#### 4. Review and refine.

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### » DURING THE GROUP TIME

#### 5. Arrive early.

The group time starts when the first person arrives. Make sure you are that person, so that you can set the tone and direction for the group Bible study time. Greet everyone as participants arrive and focus their attention on the Bible study.

#### 6. Lead the group in a time of Bible study.

Use the plan you created to lead the group time. Record notes along the way to help you remember how the group responded. Remember, every group experience takes a few unexpected twists and turns; be flexible.

**TIP:** You can record your plan on a piece of paper and carry that into the group gathering, open the Leader Guide to the Lead Group Bible Study page and guide with those pages open, or use the DOC file provided on the CD-ROM included in the *Explore the Bible Adult Leader Pack* to create your own custom notes. (The DOC file is also included in the digital bundles and digital Adult Leader Pack. See [lifeway.com/explorethebible](http://lifeway.com/explorethebible) for more information.)

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### » AFTER THE GROUP TIME

#### 7. Evaluate and Record.

Review Practice for ideas to encourage the group to put into practice the truths discovered. Record prayer requests and other insights you gained about the group and specific participants. Use these notes to help you be a better guide in the future.

#### 8. Start preparing to lead the next group time.



## INTRODUCTION TO ACTS 13–28

Most English teachers will tell you that an opening paragraph should not only grab one’s attention, it should provide the basic details of the upcoming story. Such is the case with the Book of Acts. In fact, the very first two verses tell us volumes about our book. “I wrote the first narrative, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen” (Acts 1:1-2).

### » AUTHORSHIP

Acts is the second part of a two-volume work by the same author and is addressed to Theophilus. As we examine the gospels, we find that Luke 1:1-4 begins with a greeting to this same man. Further investigation will reveal that the ending of Luke (24:44-49) intentionally overlaps with the beginning of Acts, demonstrating continuity between the two volumes. At the end of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus told the apostles to remain in the city until they received power. At the beginning of Acts we find them waiting in Jerusalem as instructed.

We can confidently conclude that Acts was written by the same person who penned the Gospel of Luke. From Luke 1:1-4 we discover that our writer was not an original eyewitness but a follower of Christ who had carefully researched everything from the beginning so that he could write an orderly sequence of Jesus’ life and ministry. Thus, we can eliminate all the apostles as potential writers. As we read Acts, we will encounter a number of “we” passages that suggest the writer was a traveling companion of Paul. By investigating Paul’s letters, we can compile a list of those who traveled with him. In 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul indicated that only Luke was with him, making him our best candidate. There are numerous other convincing indicators of Lucan authorship, including vocabulary, style, and themes that are repeated in Luke and Acts. We can affirm that Luke the physician was the writer of this two-volume work that contains twenty-five percent of all the New Testament material.

### The risen Christ is still at work advancing His kingdom through His followers—His church.

### » PURPOSE

The first verses of Luke and Acts mention Theophilus as the recipient of Luke’s writing. The name Theophilus means “friend of God” and was a common name in the first century. Some Bible students think Luke used the name with no individual in mind, but simply to indicate that his material was intended for all who are friends of God. Others, however, think that Theophilus may have been a Roman official who was interested in or sympathetic to the Christian cause. Luke would then be writing as an apologist for the Christian faith, demonstrating that the followers of Jesus were not political subversives. In any case, it is clear that Luke saw himself as a historian who wanted to provide “an orderly sequence” (Luke 1:3) of Jesus’ life and ministry.

Acts has often been referred to as “the acts of the apostles” or “the acts of the Holy Spirit.” We could also refer to the book as “the continuing acts of Jesus.” Read the latter half of Acts 1:1 again—“all that Jesus began to do and teach.” If the Gospel of Luke was the narrative of what Jesus began to do and teach, then the Book of Acts was the

continuing story of what Jesus was doing. In other words, the risen Christ is still at work advancing His kingdom through His followers—His church.

As you read Acts, you will notice that the apostles were certain that the risen Jesus had called, commissioned, and empowered them. Jesus was, therefore, still at work through them. For example, those who responded to the message at Pentecost were baptized in Jesus' name and were promised forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Peter healed the lame man at the gate to the temple "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" (3:6). In Acts 9:4, Jesus spoke directly to Saul, asking him why he was persecuting Him. When Saul asked further about His identity, He replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting." In Paul's speeches that we will study together in the next weeks, we will find that Paul consistently affirmed he had been transformed and commissioned by the living Christ. It is clear that no one 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 in which He performs His earthly ministry.

## Jesus' ascension into heaven did not mark His departure, but only a change in the manner in which He performs His earthly ministry.

### » ORGANIZATION

Luke's Gospel ends with the command for the apostles to wait the Lord clothes them with power from on high (Luke 24:49). Acts 1:8 affirms that the time of that empowering was at hand. The giving of the Holy Spirit is vitally connected to the mission of the church—"you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Chapter 2 documents the giving of the power on the day of Pentecost and the birth of the church.

While we cannot attempt to provide a detailed outline of the Book of Acts, we will find that Luke follows the expansion of the church from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Acts 1:1–8:3 chronicles the spread of the gospel in Jerusalem. After Stephen was put to death (chap. 7), widespread persecution of the church began. Those scattered by the persecution went about preaching the word, resulting in the expansion of Christianity to Samaria and the coastal regions (8:4–11:18). People in Judea and Samaria were converted, leading Luke to affirm, "So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers" (9:31). In chapter 10, they overcame a major barrier as Gentiles came to faith in Jesus as Gentiles came to faith in Jesus. A new section begins with the birth of the church in Antioch (11:19). This church was instrumental in sending Barnabas and Saul for the work the Holy Spirit set out for them. Paul's three missionary journeys are the focus of much of the second half of Acts. The Book of Acts concludes with Paul headed for Rome, where he would spread the gospel while under house arrest.



# 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)

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# THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

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

## ACTS 13:26-39

### MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 13:30

- **READ** Acts 1:1–4:31, First Thoughts (p. 14), and Understand the Context (pp. 14–15). View the video introduction by Danny Akin at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible) or on the Leader Pack CD-ROM.
- **STUDY** Acts 13:26-39, using Explore the Text on pages 15–19. Take time to identify the parts of Paul's sermon in Antioch much like you would diagram a sentence: opening words or introduction, main points, invitation, and so forth. Review 1 Corinthians 15 to discover the eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 20–21). Tailor the plans for your group using More Ideas (p. 22) and ideas included online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras). If you choose to use the suggestions under More Ideas you will need to research and be ready to play video and/or audio clips of sermons.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 4** (*Time Line: Acts*); and  **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*);  **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Winter 2017-18*);  **PACK ITEM 8** (*Chart: Paul's Recorded Sermons*); and  **PACK ITEM 10** (*Poster: Acts 13:30*). For More Ideas, gather:  Clips of your church's pastor or another well-known pastor sharing the gospel; and  A device to play music.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Justification*

Justification is God's gracious and full acquittal upon principles of His righteousness of all sinners who repent and believe in Christ. Justification brings the believer into a relationship of peace and favor with God.

## FIRST THOUGHTS

When we first meet new neighbors, we usually probe to find out a little about their history. We may ask about what brought them to the area, where they once lived, and about their family. We may also want to know about their religious beliefs. But these questions also open the door for them to ask us the same questions.

(In PSG, p. 10) **If you were meeting new neighbors, what questions would you ask them? If they asked you about your religious beliefs, what would you tell them?**

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Paul and his fellow travelers arrived in Antioch of Pisidia, a town in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). As was their custom, Paul attended worship at the local synagogue. After a public reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue leaders gave Paul the opportunity to address the gathered group (Acts 13:15). He took advantage of the opportunity by sharing the gospel with them (13:16-41). He began with God's promises to Israel and explained how Jesus was the One promised.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Luke, the Historian and Theologian" in the Winter 2017-2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### ACTS 13:1-52

We are in the second half of our study of Acts, and thus it may be helpful to provide a brief overview of the first twelve chapters. Acts is the second of a two-volume work by Luke, and it focuses on that which Jesus was continuing to accomplish through the establishment and expansion of His church (see Acts 1:1). At the end of Luke's Gospel, Jesus instructed the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit empowered them to bear witness to Jesus and preach repentance for forgiveness of sin to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem (Luke 24:46-49).

Acts 1 begins with an account of the resurrected Lord appearing to the apostles and teaching them about the kingdom of God. Jesus once again affirmed that they would receive the power of the Spirit to witness for Him from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The empowering occurred on the day of Pentecost as the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter preached the gospel, demonstrating that everything that had occurred fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. The hearers were pierced to the heart and responded in such large numbers that about three thousand people were baptized (2:41).

The church rapidly expanded as "every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (2:47). Persecution accompanied the

growth of the church, but those persecuted seized every opportunity to declare the gospel to their persecutors. The Sanhedrin martyred Stephen, one chosen to assist the disciples, for his straight-forward preaching of the gospel (Acts 6-7). The death of Stephen and the severe persecution that followed served only to advance the gospel. Chapter 8 marks the movement of the gospel to Samaria and also introduces us to Saul the persecutor who will become Paul the missionary (chap. 9).

Chapter 11 is pivotal as we are introduced to the church in Antioch, where the Gentiles first heard the gospel preached (11:20). As word of the great number of converts spread, The church sent Barnabas from Jerusalem to visit the new church in Antioch. Barnabas brought Paul to Antioch, and together they disciplined the believers for a year. Chapter 12 recounts the martyrdom of James, Peter's imprisonment and release, and Herod's death. This brings us back to the church at Antioch who, after worship and prayer, commissioned Barnabas and Paul for a church planting mission (13:1-3). The first missionary journey began as they traveled from Seleucia to Cyprus. After ministry there, they traveled to Perga where John Mark left them, and Paul and Barnabas continued on to Antioch in Pisidia.

Antioch of Pisidia is the context for Paul's message, and the local synagogue is the forum that afforded the opportunity for Paul to clearly declare the gospel. Simply stated, Paul began with the chosen people of Israel and made a beeline for Jesus (13:16-41).

When you study this passage in a commentary, you will sometimes encounter the word *kerygma*, which is a transliteration of a Greek term which means both the act of preaching and the content of that preaching. Biblical scholars have attempted to determine the content of the *kerygma* of the early church by looking at the sermons of the apostles recorded in Acts. According to their analysis, the *kerygma* included the following themes: (1) the prophecies of Messiah were fulfilled; (2) they were fulfilled by Jesus' Davidic descent, ministry, death, and resurrection; (3) Jesus has been exalted to God's right hand as the head of the new Israel; (4) the Holy Spirit is the sign of Christ's present power and glory; (5) Christ will return; and (6) a call for repentance. Notice the various elements as we study this text.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### CRUCIFIED (ACTS 13:26-29)

Paul declared that Jesus, the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, had come. But He was rejected and crucified by the residents and religious leaders of Jerusalem. Through their failures to recognize Him and the voices of their own prophets, they unwittingly fulfilled the words of the prophets by asking Pilate to have Him killed.

### BIBLE SKILL

*Compare the biblical text to a similar passage.*

Compare Paul's message in Acts 13:26-39 with the one delivered by Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:23-36). What similarities and what differences did you notice? How do the circumstances surrounding the two events account for the differences?

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## ACTS 13:26

<sup>26</sup> “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.

## ACTS 13:27-29

<sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> Though they found no grounds for the death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him killed. <sup>29</sup> 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.

### VERSE 26

Paul addressed two distinct audiences who were present that day in the synagogue. ***Children of Abraham’s race*** would refer to the Jews. They were the noble descendants of Abraham. ***Those among you who fear God*** refers to Gentiles who had attached themselves to the synagogue and are often referred to in Scripture as “God-fearers.” They were Gentiles who found the message of monotheism and the high moral values of the Jews to be very attractive, yet they had not become proselytes by circumcision. They were often among Paul’s first converts in the various cities he visited. For example, Acts 17:4 indicates that a large number of the God-fearing Greeks were persuaded to join Paul and Silas in Thessalonica.

Paul’s message was one of ***salvation***, but not salvation in terms of political deliverance from Rome. His was a message of deliverance from sin through God’s forgiving act and man’s response of belief in Jesus as we shall see in verses 38-39, which end this section. Paul had already introduced Jesus as the only one qualified to be the Savior (v. 23), and next he proceeded to explain why Jesus was crucified and how that actually fulfilled the promise given to their forefathers.

### VERSES 27-29

The ***residents of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize*** Jesus as Messiah because they failed to understand the voices of their own ***prophets*** which they heard ***read every Sabbath***. Through their failure to recognize Jesus as the true Messiah and the One who fulfilled the Messianic prophecies, they unwittingly participated in fulfilling the prophecies which indicated that Messiah must suffer and die. Thus they condemned to death the very one who came to save them.

In spite of the lack of any evidence that would require the death penalty, ***they asked Pilate to have him killed***. Jesus’ only crime was to affirm that which was true about Himself as Messiah and Son of God. Paul again emphasized God’s plan and the Jew’s involvement due to their unbelief. They actually carried out ***all that had been written about him*** concerning His death.

Did you notice that the cross is referred to as ***the tree***? This underlines the connection with Deuteronomy 21:23: “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.” They buried the one who hung on a tree, fulfilling the prophecy of Deuteronomy and affirming the reality of His death.

**Why does or doesn’t it surprise you that those who knew the prophecies of the Messiah were the ones who handed Him over to Pilate for execution? Why do people today with even greater knowledge still reject Christ’s offer of forgiveness?**

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## RESURRECTED (ACTS 13:30-37)

### VERSES 30-31

This is one of the magnificent passages where the little conjunction “but” means everything. **But God raised him from the dead.** Men crucified the Messiah, but God reversed the sentence of men. The resurrection was the clear proof that Jesus was Messiah (see Rom. 1:4).

Numerous witnesses saw the resurrected Lord over a period of many days. Paul specifically mentioned **those who came up with him from Galilee.** In this instance he does not include himself among the eyewitnesses as he does in the Corinthian epistle (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8). Paul includes a more extensive list of the eyewitnesses to the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. The point is clear and powerful—those who had seen the resurrected Lord had become His **witnesses.**

### Eye Witnesses of the Risen Christ (In PSG, p. 15)

- *Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18)*
- *Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and Joanna (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10)*
- *Two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)*
- *Peter in Jerusalem (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5)*
- *The disciples with Thomas absent (John 20:19-25)*
- *The disciples with Thomas present (John 20:26-29)*
- *Seven disciples by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-14)*
- *Eleven disciples on a mountain in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-20)*
- *Over five hundred at one time (1 Cor. 15:7)*
- *James, the brother of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7)*
- *Paul on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:5)*

### VERSES 32-33

Paul declared **good news** that had been promised to the forefathers. God’s plan of redemption for Israel and the nations was not a new plan, but the very promise given to their **ancestors.** God had now fulfilled this promise of good news to the children of the forefathers by **raising up Jesus** from the dead. Raising up Jesus could refer to the resurrection and the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of the Father. In this manner it would refer to the whole series of saving events which were inaugurated by the crucifixion.

Psalms 2 was interpreted in Messianic terms by Jews and Christians alike. In the psalm’s original context, the word **today** referred to the inauguration of the king. Matthew and Luke applied the psalm to the baptism of Jesus (see Matt. 3:17; Luke 3:22). The writer of Hebrews applied it to Jesus’ high priestly ministry in the heavens (Heb. 5:5). Here in Acts 13:33 Paul probably had in mind Jesus’ resurrection. Obviously, Jesus has been the Son of God for all eternity. Thus, the use of this

### ACTS 13:30-31

<sup>30</sup> But God raised him from the dead, <sup>31</sup> 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.

### ACTS 13:32-33

<sup>32</sup> And we ourselves proclaim to you the good news of the promise that was made to our ancestors. <sup>33</sup> 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.

psalm can in no way suggest that Jesus was born of earthly parents and then adopted as God's Son. He was eternally the Son of God and declared to be such by the witness of the Father. God's raising Jesus from the dead powerfully demonstrated that Jesus was and always had been God's Son.

## ACTS 13:34-37

<sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> Therefore he also says in another passage, You will not let your Holy One see decay. <sup>36</sup> For David, after serving God's purpose in his own generation, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and decayed, <sup>37</sup> but the one God raised up did not decay.

### VERSES 34-37

Paul's argument here is both clear and convincing. The promise of incorruption was not fulfilled by David but by David's seed, Jesus the Messiah. David, after fulfilling the will of God in his own time, ***fell asleep*** (died), ***was buried with his fathers, and decayed***. Not only did God raise up Jesus as Messiah, but He raised Him up in another sense by raising Him ***from the dead***. The promise that a king would sit on David's throne forever (1 Chron. 17:10,15) could not have been fulfilled apart from the resurrection and eternal enthronement of Jesus.

**How does the truth that Jesus is resurrected from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father impact your daily life?**

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Paul clearly anchored his argument in Old Testament prophecy by first referring to Isaiah 55:3 in verse 34 and then to Psalm 16:10 in verse 35. Centuries after God made the promises to David himself, God assured His people, ***I will give you the holy and sure promises of David***. This reaffirmation of the promise through Isaiah indicates that the promise had not been fulfilled through David himself. The reference to Psalm 16:10 declares that the blessings required the resurrection of Jesus in order to be secured forever. Peter quoted this same verse in the same sense in his Pentecost message (see Acts 2:31).

After quoting Psalm 16:10, Paul indicated that David did not fulfill this prophecy. After serving his generation; David died, was buried, and underwent decay. In contrast to David who underwent natural decay; ***the one God raised up did not decay***.

(In PSG, p. 16) **Why do you think it was important for Paul to point both to eyewitnesses and to the Scriptures to explain the importance of Jesus' resurrection? How do these work together to give us confidence in the resurrection today?**

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## PROCLAIMED (ACTS 13:38-39)

### VERSES 38-39

Don't overlook the *therefore* that must necessarily precede such a grand message—*let it be known*. It would be criminal to know a message that promised justification from sins and not proclaim that message to the world. The *kerygma* (see p. 15) in the early church was regularly concluded with a direct application to the hearers which called for repentance and offered forgiveness of sins.

**All people by nature and by action are sinners, and thus all people need to discover the solution to the sin problem.**

*Brothers and sisters* not only speaks of Paul's kinship with his Jewish hearers, but also expresses his affection for them. *Let it be known* underlines the gravity of the message. There is no message as grand as the message that we can receive forgiveness of our sins. All people by nature and action are sinners, and thus all people need to discover the solution to the sin problem.

God does not require a legalistic observance of the law but belief in Jesus Christ. The Jewish law made scant provision for sins committed with a high hand as opposed to those committed with ignorance. Beyond that, the law makes man aware of his sin but does not provide justification from sin. In contrast, the one who believes in Christ is completely justified. The law could not deliver from the guilt or power of sin, but both are available in Christ. In Christ we are completely justified. This is good news.

**Are we ever guilty of failing to consider the "therefore" of this message? In what ways?**

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**With whom do you need to share the gospel message this week?**

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### ACTS 13:38-39

<sup>38</sup> Therefore, let it be known to you, brothers and sisters, that through this man forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you. <sup>39</sup> Everyone who believes is justified through him from everything that you could not be justified from through the law of Moses."

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**ENGAGE:** As the group arrives, invite them to share about a memorable sermon or speech. Ask: *What made that particular sermon or speech memorable?* Highlight responses that emphasize the content.

**DISPLAY:** After most have arrived, call attention to **Pack Item 10** (*Poster: Acts 13:30*). Read the words printed on the pack item together. Say: *Despite all Jesus had been through, God was faithful to raise Him from the dead. God providing salvation for all who believe in Jesus is the message of the gospel.*

**TRANSITION:** *Paul's sermon in Antioch was directed toward a group of people who had yet to hear the gospel message. Look for how he communicated this message in our study today, making his sermon a memorable sermon for those present that day.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Select a volunteer to read aloud Acts 13:26-29 in the manner you imagine Paul would have preached.

**CONTEXTUALIZE:** Note that this study on the second half of Acts picks up after the first half of Acts already covered in Spring 2016. Direct attention to **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*) and **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: Winter 2017-18*) in order to review the previous study in Acts and to preview what's to come. Note each of Paul's missionary journeys and the number of cities he visited on the map. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 4** (*Time Line: Acts*) and direct the group to find and mark the juncture denoting the events in today's study under AD 41-49.

**ANALYZE:** Invite the group to identify the introductory elements in Paul's opening remarks, beginning with the audience: *Who are the two groups that Paul addressed?*

**CLASSIFY:** Guide the group to identify the sermon topic: *What was Paul's message about? To whom did he refer?*

**INTRODUCE:** Write the phrase "make a beeline to the cross" on the whiteboard. Explain that Paul was addressing a crowd of people who had no idea about the gospel. Begin a list of Paul's main points.

**ASK:** *What do the actions of the people of Jerusalem teach us about humanity and our need for a Savior? How do people reject Jesus today despite knowing that He died for them?* (PSG, p. 14)

**TRANSITION:** Stress that the story of Jesus never ends at the cross and that Paul's sermon did not stop there either.

**READ:** Call on the volunteer to continue reading aloud Acts 13:30-37 as Paul might have.

**NOTE:** Point out that the PSG (p. 15) directs the readers' attention to the importance of the eyewitness evidence of Jesus' resurrection and links to the scriptural prophecies.

**EMPHASIZE:** Reread verse 30, noting that this is the memory verse for today's session. Encourage Scripture memorization by distributing copies of **Pack Item 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*).

**STRENGTHEN:** Direct the group to 1 Corinthians 15 to look for the eyewitnesses whom Paul cited.

**CLARIFY:** Call on a volunteer to read from the PSG (p. 16) the information under Verses 34-37. Emphasize that Paul was careful to reference prophecies of Jesus as the Christ. Direct the group to explore Isaiah 55 and Psalm 16 as referenced by Paul.

**ENLIGHTEN:** *Why do you think it was important for Paul to point both to eyewitnesses and to the Scriptures to explain the importance of Jesus' resurrection? How do these work together to give us confidence in the resurrection today?* (PSG, p. 16) *The doctrine of eternal life is very clear in this passage. How did Paul make that point?*

**DEFINE:** Call on a volunteer to read about the doctrine of justification from the PSG (p. 16).

**TRANSITION:** Point out that merely explaining the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ falls short of communicating the complete gospel message. Paul's message did not end there.

**READ:** Direct the group to silently read aloud Acts 13:38-39. Guide them to the information under Verses 38-39 in the PSG (p. 17). Explain that this portion of Paul's sermon was the main point.

**EMPHASIZE:** Draw attention to Paul's point that Jesus justified us in a way that could not be accomplished through the law. Ask: *What would you say to a person who claims there are multiple ways to God and His heaven?* (PSG, p. 17)

**TRANSITION:** Call attention to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 18): *As a group, brainstorm different ways people try to justify themselves and their sin. Then look for ways Paul's speech at Antioch of Pisidia gives an answer to those efforts. With whom can you talk this week using insights gained from this discussion?*

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**REVIEW:** *If you were addressing a group of people who had never heard the gospel, what would you include from Paul's sermon? If the group does not include all the points covered in Paul's message—especially Jesus' death, resurrection, and invitation for people to receive Him—add those to the discussion now.*

**APPLY:** Point out that only a few group members may get opportunities to share the gospel from a church platform or in public meeting places. However, each person may create opportunities to share with friends, families, and acquaintances. Say: *The reason that Paul got straight to the point and urgently shared the gospel of Christ, His death, and resurrection was to help others discover how to have eternal life. Have you received Jesus Christ as your Savior? If you have, are you sharing that message with others?*

**PRAY:** Thank God for Jesus our Savior, and ask Him to quicken the hearts of anyone who has not accepted Him. Pray that God will empower each person to become aware of and create opportunities to share. Pray also for any lost persons the group has identified.



## PRACTICE

- Encourage anyone who may have made a decision for Christ or would like to explore it further to meet and talk with you or a church leader.
- Email the group during the week and remind them to look for opportunities to share the gospel message. Encourage them to include the elements outlined during the group time, especially an invitation to receive Christ.
- Look for personal opportunities to share the gospel message with an unbeliever during the week. Report back to the group.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

*Ask: If you were asked to speak to a group about visiting our city or county/parish, what would you tell them? What would you invite them to do?*

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To add to the discussion on the points that Paul included in his gospel message, show or play a clip of a message by your church's pastor or other preacher that aptly communicates Jesus' death.
- Review the specific locations and themes of Paul's other sermons in Acts using **Pack Item 8** (*Chart: Paul's Recorded Sermons*).
- To compare types of sermons related to the Acts 13:26-29 discussion, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 14 of the PSG.
- To supplement discussion of eyewitnesses in Acts 13:30-37, review the eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ's resurrection on page 15 of the PSG.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to select a volunteer to compose and deliver an impromptu gospel message, being sure to cover the death and resurrection of Jesus with an invitation to receive Him as Savior. If no one volunteers, be prepared to share that message yourself. Encourage the group also to be ready to share whenever they get the opportunity.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play the song "The Old Rugged Cross," by George Bennard, as a closing. Encourage the group to reflect on whether the gospel is presented in the song and consider various vehicles that may be used to deliver the message of redemption.

# MISGUIDED WORSHIP

Only God is worthy of worship and praise.

## ACTS 14:8-20

### MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 14:15b

- **READ** Acts 1:1–4:31, First Thoughts (p. 24), and Understand the Context (pp. 24–25). Consider your own preparation for worship as you read.
- **STUDY** Acts 14:8-20, using Explore the Text (pp. 25–29). As you study, make a list of all the things that you have allowed to interfere with worship of the one true God. For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 30–31). Consult *QuickSource* for additional discussion questions (available from LifeWay.com). As you prepare, consider ways that you may make the group time a more worshipful experience.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides. Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*);  **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline of Acts*);  **PACK ITEM 7** (*Poster: Key Cities in Paul's Journeys*); and  **PACK ITEM 9** (*Poster: Difficulties Faced by Early Missionaries*).



## KEY DOCTRINE

### God

There is one and only one living and true God.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Compare and contrast passages looking for similarities.*

Read Romans 1:26-32. Compare Paul's explanation of the response of pagans to the good things of God and the sermon he preached in Lystra in Acts 14:15-17. We refer to God's revelation in conscience and nature as "natural" or "general revelation." What is the role of general revelation? What are the similarities between the two passages? What can we learn about sharing the gospel by comparing these two passages?

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

When it comes to worship, the focus is often more on style than on substance. The purpose of all worship is not to please the crowd, but to worship God. Sometimes we are guilty of making ourselves the focus of worship, thinking that the music and other elements must please us. Instead, we should always be asking if our worship is pleasing to God.

(In PSG, p. 19) **How would you describe most people's attitudes toward worship? For what reasons do people attend a church worship service?**

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Only God is worthy of our worship and praise. In Lystra, Paul faced the problem of misguided worship. After Paul became the instrument through whom God healed a lame man, the crowds mistook him for one of the gods and wanted to offer sacrifices to him. Barnabas and Paul were grief stricken when they saw the uninformed response from the crowd. When Barnabas and Paul corrected the crowd's misunderstanding, the sentiment changed from worship to one of hate and persecution.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ACTS 14:1-28

Last week we left Paul in Antioch of Pisidia where he delivered a powerful message in the synagogue, demonstrating that Jesus was the long-anticipated Messiah who alone could bring forgiveness of sin and a right relationship with God. After the synagogue service was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who were persuading them "to continue in the grace of God" (Acts 13:43). When the size of the crowd increased the next Sabbath, the Jews began to oppose Paul by insulting him. Paul and Barnabas declared that it was necessary to preach first to the Jews, but since the Jews had rejected the message, they would now focus on the Gentiles (14:36). The response from the Gentiles was immediate and the message spread through the whole region. This resulted in persecution and expulsion from the region, but the disciples' response was one of joy prompted by the Holy Spirit (13:52).

The pattern of successful preaching in the synagogue followed by great division in the community was repeated in Iconium. When Paul and Barnabas discovered that the Jews and Gentiles and their rulers planned to assault and stone the two of them, Paul and Barnabas fled the countryside around Lystra and Derbe. But rather than hiding out from their persecutors, Luke affirms, "And there they kept evangelizing" (14:7).

Lystra was a city in south central Asia that was considered to be an important Lycaonian center. According to Acts 16:1 it was the home of Timothy, a young man who, in God's timing, would become one of Paul's companions and fellow-laborers.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### HEALING (ACTS 14:8-10)

#### VERSES 8-10

On one occasion while Paul was preaching, a lame man was part of the audience. Luke made it abundantly clear that this man was totally incapable of walking which, in turn, bore testimony to the miraculous nature of the cure. Luke speaks of his inability to walk in three different ways—***without strength in his feet, had never walked, and had been lame from birth.*** It goes without saying that he would be seated to hear Paul, but Luke adds that final note to indicate that everyone who knew this man would know that his disability was total and permanent.

Paul saw the lame man listening to his message and watched him closely. The apostle determined that he had the faith to be healed. Luke doesn't indicate how Paul was able to discern this, but we must assume he was informed by the Holy Spirit. Both in the Gospels and in Acts, faith is regularly mentioned as a condition of receiving both spiritual and physical healing.

Paul commanded him in a loud voice, ***“Stand up on your feet!”*** The man exhibited his faith by his ready obedience to Paul's command. Without hesitation, a man who had never taken a step in his life, ***jumped up and began to walk around.*** He didn't walk like a toddler who is tentatively attempting to take a first step, but he walked around giving full evidence that a miracle had occurred.

There are clearly similarities between this account and Peter's encounter at the temple gate with the man who had been lame from birth (see Acts 3:2-8). When healed, the man at the temple gate likewise started to walk and was seen leaping and praising God in the temple complex. The response from the crowd and the follow-up, however, was markedly different. Those in the temple complex were filled with awe and astonishment, which provided the context for Peter's message. In Lystra, the pagan audience was convinced they had been visited by the gods.

(In PSG, p. 22) **How does God use people today to accomplish His work? How does that compare to how He used Paul in this passage?**

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### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “The Greek Gods” in the Winter 2017-2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

### ACTS 14:8-10

<sup>8</sup> In Lystra a man was sitting who was without strength in his feet, had never walked, and had been lame from birth.

<sup>9</sup> He listened as Paul spoke. After looking directly at him and seeing that he had faith to be healed, <sup>10</sup> Paul said in a loud voice, “Stand up on your feet!” And he jumped up and began to walk around.

## REACTION (ACTS 14:11-13)

The reaction to the miraculous healing was instantaneous and enthusiastic, yet not what Paul and Barnabas would have desired. The predominately Gentile audience believed the gods had come among them in the form of men, and they prepared to worship the missionaries.

### ACTS 14:11-12

<sup>11</sup> 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!” <sup>12</sup> Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.

#### VERSES 11-12

Amazement over the healing of the lame man rippled through the crowd. They believed that two of the pantheon of gods had visited them in the persons of Paul and Barnabas. The use of the local vernacular explains why Paul and Barnabas did not clearly understand that preparations were being made to worship them as gods until plans were already underway (see v. 13).

The missionaries became aware of the confusion when the crowd began to refer to Barnabas as **Zeus** and Paul as **Hermes**. These gods, Jupiter, and Mercury in the Latin form, were found combined in cults over a wide area. Zeus was the chief god in the Greek pantheon and Hermes was the herald of the gods. The people of Lystra may have identified Barnabas with Zeus because of his more dignified bearing and Paul with Hermes because he was the chief speaker.

### Zeus and Hermes

Zeus	Hermes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>god of the sky</i></li><li>• <i>chief of the Greek gods</i></li><li>• <i>his devotees believed the elements of the weather were under his control</i></li><li>• <i>Greek equivalent of the Roman god Jupiter</i></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>god of oratory and inventor of speech</i></li><li>• <i>messenger of the gods and their chief spokesperson</i></li><li>• <i>associated with eloquence</i></li><li>• <i>Greek equivalent of the Roman god Mercury</i></li></ul>

### ACTS 14:13

<sup>13</sup> 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.

#### VERSE 13

Since the people believed the gods had visited them in the forms of these two messengers, the locals made plans to give them appropriate honors. The local **priest of Zeus**, whose temple was just outside the city gates, prepared an appropriate sacrifice. The **bulls** would have been decorated with festive garlands as befitted animals being offered to the gods.

The people had heard Paul share the gospel message and had seen the power of the gospel displayed through the healing of the lame man. However, they missed the point and tried to explain what they saw in terms of what they were already willing to believe. They were either unwilling or unable to recognize God’s work.

(In PSG, p. 23) **What are some ways people misunderstand or misinterpret God's work today? Why do some people incorrectly attribute God's work to other people or circumstances?**

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## REDIRECTED (ACTS 14:14-18)

When Paul and Barnabas fully understood that the crowd was preparing to worship them as gods, they tore their robes as an indication of their utter horror. They immediately attempted to redirect the focus of the crowd to worship the one true God.

### VERSE 14

It may sometimes be tempting for us to take the praise for what God does through us. But such was not the case for Paul and Barnabas. They were appalled at the response of the crowd and indicated it by tearing their robes. When the Jews tore their robes it was a dramatic response that communicated strong emotion. For example, in Mark 14:63 there is an account of the high priest tearing his robes when Jesus responded in the affirmative about His identity as the Messiah. The missionaries could not tolerate such a misunderstanding. After tearing their robes they **rushed into the crowd, shouting** their corrective teaching.

### VERSE 15

Barnabas and Paul first questioned the crowd's motivation. **"People! Why are you doing these things?"** They affirmed that they were men with the same human nature as everyone in the crowd. The difference was that they had a message of **good news**. The message delivered here is worthy of our close attention since it was delivered to an audience that was primarily pagan in its make-up (see also Acts 17:22-34). Paul put his message in the framework of his audience's understanding. We often refer to this as contextualization. For example, in Paul's sermon to a Jewish audience in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia, he appealed to Old Testament events and prophecies (13:16-41). In Lystra, to an audience that seems to have consisted of Gentile pagans, Paul appealed less to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and more to the natural revelation of God in creation. There was a difference in emphasis because of the nature of the audience, yet his message was consistent with basic biblical truth.

Paul first affirmed what even the Jews would have affirmed. Idols are **worthless** and God is the one true and **living God**. The works of creation—**the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them**—indicate that God is living and supplies the needs of men. We find a similar emphasis in Paul's letter to the Romans: "since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes,

## ACTS 14:14

<sup>14</sup> The apostles Barnabas and Paul tore their robes when they heard this and rushed into the crowd, shouting:

## ACTS 14:15

<sup>15</sup> "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.

that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse” (Rom. 1:19-20).

## There was a difference in emphasis because of the nature of the audience, yet his message was consistent with basic biblical truth.

### ACTS 14:16-18

<sup>16</sup> In past generations he allowed all the nations to go their own way, <sup>17</sup> 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.” <sup>18</sup> Even though they said these things, they barely stopped the crowds from sacrificing to them.

#### VERSES 16-18

In past generations God allowed the nations **to go their own way**. You will find a similar statement and emphasis in Paul’s message to the people of Athens. After affirming that the one true God created everything that exists and gives life to all people, he concluded: “Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, 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” (Acts 17:30-31).

In both passages (chaps. 14 and 17) Paul affirmed that the providential care of God for all people is evidence of His existence and character. In the passage we cited from Romans 1, Paul indicated that this limited revelation is sufficient to make people accountable. The penalty for the rejection of the limited light is God’s giving men over to their own desires. In our present passage, Paul again emphasized God’s honoring the nations’ decision to go their own way. The point is not that God was indifferent or indulgent of man’s sin, but that He was gracious in His patience. Because of His goodness, **he did not leave himself without a witness, since he did what is good**. God showed His goodness in the gift of **rain** and **fruitful seasons** which satisfied the hearts of people with **food** and **joy**.

In spite of the protests of Paul and Barnabas and the clear nature of their witness, the missionaries were barely able to stop the crowd from sacrificing to them.

**What can we learn from Paul’s contextualization of his message based on his audience? How can we use the good things we do for others as a means of pointing them to the goodness of God?**

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(In PSG, p. 25) **What were the potential dangers if Paul and Barnabas had accepted the praise from the people? What attitudes did Paul and Barnabas display in pointing the people to Jesus?**

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## REJECTED (ACTS 14:19-20)

Events in Lystra intensified when hostile Jews from other cities came to Lystra and rallied the crowd against Paul. Paul was left for dead but found alive by his companions. The passage ends with an affirmation that Paul and Barnabas were undeterred by persecution.

### VERSE 19

Luke did not mention a synagogue in Lystra, but such seems likely. It would certainly help us to understand how the Jews from **•Antioch and •Iconium** were able to win over the crowd and turn them against Paul and Barnabas. It is fascinating how the sentiment of a crowd can change so quickly. Paul and Barnabas, recently acclaimed as messengers of the gods, were now the target of mob violence. Paul was **stoned ... dragged ... out of the city**, and left for **dead**. Paul mentioned the stoning as one of the indignities he was allowed to face for Christ (see 2 Cor. 11:25; 2 Tim. 3:11). He considered the wounds from his stonings and beatings as the marks of Jesus on his body (see Gal. 6:17). In other words, the actions of the crowd in Lystra were not simply actions taken against two men but they were a rejection of Jesus and His messengers.

## Paul and Barnabas were undeterred by the opposition of men.

### VERSE 20

What is most fascinating about verse 20 is the simplicity with which it is told. Paul was stoned and left for dead, but after the disciples surrounded him **he got up and went into the town**. His ability to stand up, walk into town, and depart for continuing ministry clearly implies a miraculous healing. The note that the disciples **gathered around him** suggests that they were praying for God to raise him up from sure death.

The immediate departure for **•Derbe** does not suggest fear on the part of the two missionaries. On the contrary, it clearly indicates their commitment to complete the mission given to them by God. Paul and Barnabas were undeterred by the opposition of men.

(In PSG, p. 26) **To what lengths might a person go to discredit or silence the gospel message? What can we learn from Paul's response that might help us deal with efforts to discredit or quiet the gospel message today?**

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### ACTS 14:19

<sup>19</sup> 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.

### ACTS 14:20

<sup>20</sup> After the disciples gathered around him, he got up and went into the town. The next day he left with Barnabas for Derbe.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**DIAGRAM:** Draw attention to the subject of worship by charting the act of worship. Label a whiteboard with the word “Worship.” Write the word “Worshiper” on the bottom left of the whiteboard and the word “God” on the top right.

**ELICIT:** Invite the group to identify factors that facilitate worship, such as setting and preparation. Depict these with arrows from the worshiper to God. Between the two, add barriers blocking the arrows. Use information from the main paragraph on page 19 of the PSG to discuss style versus substance.

**QUESTION:** *If you were to chart your worship, what would it look like? Would it be an orderly, seamless flow of praise? Disrupted? Or misdirected?*

**TRANSITION:** Note that Paul’s activities in Lystra represent a lesson on how to keep our worship in proper order. Use **Pack Item 2** (*Outline of Acts*) to identify the cities and order of Paul’s travels. Note that today’s study places Paul in Lystra. Use **Pack Item 7** (*Poster: Key Cities in Paul’s Journeys*) and read the information about Lystra. Highlight **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul’s Missionary Journeys*) to point out its location.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Direct the group to read Acts 14:8-10 to themselves (PSG, p. 21) and underline any words or phrases that could be interpreted as acts of worship. Call for responses.

**REMARK:** Point out that Paul’s sermon took a dramatic turn when a supernatural healing became a byproduct of his message.

**FOCUS:** Draw attention to Paul’s notice of the crippled man’s faith, both in the way that he listened raptly and in the way he responded.

**RESPOND:** Encourage the group to decide whether this was an act of worship for the crippled man or Paul—or both. Then ask: *How does God use people today to accomplish His work? How does that compare to how He used Paul in this passage?* (PSG, p. 22)

**REFER:** Draw the group’s attention to page 22 of the PSG. Direct a volunteer to read the paragraphs under Verse 10 that discuss Acts 3:2-8. Note that faith was a key ingredient to that healing, too.

**TRANSITION:** *Such a spectacular display of God’s power had an immediate and dramatic effect not only on the crippled man but others who witnessed that healing.*

**READ:** Direct the group to read Acts 14:11-13 silently. Lead them to call out any words or phrases that could be construed as worship.

**LIST:** Call on volunteers to identify the ways that the people engaged in misguided worship.

**DISCUSS:** Lead a discussion about how worship became misguided. Ask: *What caused the misunderstanding?* Suggest that language barriers may have been a factor, but it’s more likely that the people relied on their own understanding.

**ASK:** *What are some ways people misunderstand or misinterpret God's work today? Why do some people incorrectly attribute God's work to other people or circumstances? (PSG, p. 23)*

**READ:** Direct the group to read Acts 14:14-18 and underline the action verbs in the passage. Invite volunteers to call out the words they underlined and write them on the whiteboard.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Circle the words that described Paul and Barnabas' actions. Point out that the verbs suggest urgency.

**DISCOVER:** Direct the group to the PSG (pp. 24–25) under Verses 15-17 to help outline the ways that Paul again tried to direct the people's attention to the one true God.

**DETERMINE:** *Paul and Barnabas managed to prevent the sacrifice. What makes that so important?*

**TRANSITION:** *What were the potential dangers if Paul and Barnabas had accepted the praise from the people? What attitudes did Paul and Barnabas display in pointing the people to Jesus? (PSG, p. 25)*

**READ:** Direct the group to read Acts 14:19:20 and underline action verbs. Identify words attributed to Jews, noting that those who disrupt worship may be as forceful as those who facilitate it.

**INDICATE:** Talk about the stoning Paul endured. Draw attention to **Pack Item 9** (*Poster: Difficulties Faced by Early Missionaries*) and the PSG, page 26, to draw parallels to the stoning of Stephen, recorded in Acts 7:54–8:1. Discuss the determination and faith required to keep focused on sharing the gospel despite persecution.

**TRANSITION:** Reread verse 19, which depicts Paul's survival of the stoning after being ministered to by other believers and his subsequent continuation of his missionary journey. *To what lengths might a person go to discredit or silence the gospel message? What can we learn from Paul's response that might help us deal with efforts to discredit or quiet the gospel message today? (PSG, p. 26)*

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**DIRECT:** Guide the group's attention back to the worship chart. List some of the barriers encountered in the study: language, refusal to listen, skepticism, agitation, and so forth.

**APPLY:** Invite the group to call out ways that misguided worship happens today. Also point to the ways that we may apply principles of worship as Paul and Barnabas did.

**REFER:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud the bulleted points under In My Context (PSG, p. 27). Point out: *Our challenge is to do our part to keep worship pure. Worship belongs to God, and we should be pointing people to Him and stay out of the way.*

**RESPOND:** Call attention to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 27): *List ways you can help unbelievers and skeptics identify God's work in the world. How can your group help you do the things you listed? What needs to change in your own life to point others to Christ?*

**PRAY:** Close in prayer for an understanding of God's work in this world. Ask God to search the hearts of each person present to reveal attitudes that may need change.



## PRACTICE

- As the group leader, follow up by organizing a special worship time during the week. Rather than a meeting time, it could be sharing testimonies of God's goodness or simple words of adoration through a group text or email.
- Email the group during the week and share a list of worship facilitators that they may want to take advantage of, such as the name of a Christian radio station, a link to an inspiring sermon, or an online journal.
- Text the group before your next meeting with an invitation to participate in worship by attending and taking part in your next meeting.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As the group arrives, place them into small teams and ask each team to list examples of ways to facilitate both public and private worship, as well as examples of how worship may become misguided.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To add to the discussion on healing, lead the group to discuss ways God uses demonstrations of His power to open the door for believers to share the gospel.
- To deepen the group's understanding of Barnabas and Paul's response, direct them to read Psalm 146. Ask: *How does this psalm address the situation Barnabas and Paul faced?*
- To inspire others to keep on serving God no matter the obstacles they encounter, research and share a story of someone who did not quit despite encountering severe hardships or condemnation. Search online stories using the word *persevered*.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Suggest that the group keep a log of their public and private worship encounters during the week, noting factors that served to enhance their worship or that became barriers. Remind them to include church experiences, small groups or personal devotions, social media, TV, radio, and so forth. Encourage them to discern ways to remove barriers or to correct misguided worship as it occurs. If input from the rest of the group is needed or desired, suggest a group email or text for immediate feedback.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Share the lyrics to the song "One True God," by Steven Curtis Chapman. Invite participants to share the words or phrases that particularly resonate with them or facilitate worship.

# AVAILABLE TO ALL

Salvation is available to everyone through faith in Jesus alone.

## ACTS 15:6-11,24-31

### MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 15:9

- **READ** Acts 15:1-35, First Thoughts (p. 34), and Understand the Context (pp. 34–35).
- **STUDY** Acts 15:6-11,24-31, using Explore the Text (pp. 35–39). As you study, make a list of all the ways people have tried to make salvation about more than God’s act of grace through Jesus Christ. For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 40–41) and More Ideas (p. 42), in *QuickSource*, and on [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras). Consider using at least one of the More Ideas during this week’s group time.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides;  A gift-wrapped box with something of little value, such as a gift card; and  A bag of potatoes or apples, dumbbells, or some other element with weight and substance. Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul’s Missionary Journeys*); and  **PACK ITEM 6** (*Poster: Paul’s Missionary Team Members*).



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Salvation*

There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Who Were the Judaizers?” and “Apostles, Elders, and Prophets in the Early Church” in the Winter 2017-2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

## BIBLE SKILL

*Read, reflect on, and react emotionally to a Bible verse.*

Reflect on Acts 15:9. What words stand out to you as you read the verse through repeatedly? What emotions does this verse elicit? When you read the phrase “no distinction” what first comes to your mind? What distinctions do we make that might hinder the flow of the gospel through the witness of our church?

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

Some matters require believers to agree to disagree. Some people view the eleven o'clock hour as the only time for a worship service, while others think it's okay to worship at other times. Some prefer one style of worship; others prefer a different style. Viewpoints surrounding Jesus' second coming might also be an area where we agree to disagree. But there are some beliefs that are non-negotiable.

(In PSG, p. 28) **What beliefs are non-negotiable? How can a person decide which issues are secondary and which are non-negotiable?**

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When Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey, they discovered that some men from Judea were teaching the brothers that they needed to be circumcised in order to be saved. What was at stake in this instance was the essence of the gospel itself. Was (is) it necessary to add any “work” to grace in order for persons to be forgiven and stand in right relationship with God? Were Jews and Gentiles both saved through grace alone by faith alone? This question had to be resolved if the church was going to be faithful in taking the gospel to all the nations. Much was at stake, and thus the early church had to find a biblical and responsible way to resolve the issue.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ACTS 15:1-35

We left Paul in Lystra where the crowd who wanted to worship him stoned him and left him for dead. After the disciples ministered to Paul, he left the next day for Derbe, continuing the work to which God had called him. After witnessing to many, he began his return trip to Antioch. He traveled back through Lystra and Iconium, strengthening the believers and warning them of impending persecution. He and Barnabas continued their return journey to Antioch, appointing leaders in every church along the way (14:23-28).

When they arrived in Antioch, the missionaries discovered that some men who had come from Judea were teaching the brothers that they had to be circumcised in order to be saved (15:1-2). Some commentaries will refer to these men as “Judaizers” because they were essentially teaching that Gentiles had to first become Jews through circumcision in order to be saved by Jesus the Jewish Messiah. Paul and Barnabas recognized the critical nature of the issue and began to engage them in serious argument and debate (15:2).

The church in Antioch decided to send Paul and Barnabas to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem so that they could resolve this issue. Even as they traveled to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas seized the opportunity to share with believers in Phoenicia and Samaria about the conversion of the Gentiles. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the leaders and the church and reported all the things God was doing through their ministry. At this point, the Pharisees who had become believers made an appeal that Gentiles should be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### NO DISTINCTION (ACTS 15:6-11)

The apostles and elders assembled to discuss the question of what was necessary for the inclusion of non-Jewish believers. Peter was the first to address the assembly and he reminded the listeners that the issue they were debating had already been addressed by God through Peter's own mouth. Thus he affirmed that all people are saved regardless of their ancestry or compliance with Jewish rituals. While this issue may seem a bit dated, it has serious ramifications for issues related to racism in our day.

#### VERSE 6

The ***apostles and the elders*** would have been the leaders of the early church. The *apostles* were the original eyewitnesses and the *elders* were the pastoral leaders of the early church (see 1 Pet. 5:1-4, where Peter called himself a fellow-elder and exhorted the elders to shepherd the flock). However, if we glance ahead to verse 12 we find that the "whole assembly" was present. It is clear that there was some form of membership in the early church and that the entire body of the church was involved in the church meeting that was called to resolve this critical issue. We find a similar structure in Acts 6:1-6, where the whole company of disciples was gathered to select and appoint men who would be responsible for the daily distribution of food to the widows. Clearly, the church was designed to function best with both leaders and lay involvement when significant decisions must be made.

#### VERSES 7-8

After a period of dialogue and ***much debate***, Peter, as leader of the twelve, spoke clearly and forcefully on the essence of the gospel. He reminded the assembly that the fundamental principal they were now debating had been decided ***in the early days*** of the church when God sent Peter to Cornelius so that the Gentiles could hear the gospel and believe. The Lord gave Peter a vision concerning clean and unclean food, affirming, "what God has made clean, do not call impure" (Acts 10:15). When Peter arrived at the home of Cornelius, he found many people gathered there. After Peter heard of the vision that prompted Cornelius to send for him, he began to speak: "I truly understand that God doesn't show favoritism,

### ACTS 15:6-8

<sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter.  
<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us.

but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34-35). Further, Peter reminded his listeners that God, who knew people’s hearts, gave a clear sign of the inclusion of the Gentiles by giving the Holy Spirit to them. In Acts 10:44 we discover that the Holy Spirit came down on all those who heard the message. On that occasion, the Jewish or circumcised believers were astounded because God had given the Gentiles the Spirit in the same way He had given the Spirit to the Jews at Pentecost.

## ACTS 15:9-11

<sup>9</sup> He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> 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? <sup>11</sup> On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are.”

### VERSES 9-11

The essence of Peter’s argument is clear—if God made no distinction between the Jews and Gentiles in regard to salvation, why would the Jews now require of the Gentiles more than God required? God cleansed their hearts by faith. To require additional works from the Gentiles would both test God and place **a yoke** on the necks of the Gentiles that the Jews themselves had been unable to bear.

The idea of **testing God** is from Deuteronomy 6:16 and was cited by Jesus during His own temptation experience (Luke 4:12; Matt. 4:7). The original context in Deuteronomy was the testing of God at Massah when Israel complained about the lack of water and questioned whether the Lord was still among them (see Ex. 17:7). Consistently God had given Israel clear evidence of His presence and provision, yet they doubted and tested Him. If God had already given abundant evidence that He makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles concerning salvation, for the people to add anything to God’s decision would be tantamount to putting God to the test.

### To add anything to the simplicity of the gospel would be an unnecessary and unbearable yoke.

Requiring works in addition to salvation instead of salvation by grace alone through faith alone would be like placing *a yoke* on the Gentiles which neither the Jews of the first century nor their forefathers had been able to bear. Jesus had condemned the scribes and Pharisees for binding heavy loads and putting them on people’s shoulders when they themselves didn’t lift a finger to move them (Matt. 23:4). Proselytes—converts to Judaism—were said to “take up the yoke of the kingdom of heaven” when they undertook to fulfill the law. To ordinary Jews like Peter and his audience, the law’s requirements, especially as interpreted by the scribes and Pharisees, were a burden under which they groaned. Peter and his companions had learned to rejoice in the gentle yoke of the Savior (see Matt. 11:28-30). To add anything to the simplicity of the gospel would be an unnecessary and unbearable yoke.

Finally, Peter affirmed that the salvation that **we** (meaning the Jews), had experienced had been **through the grace of the Lord Jesus**. If God saved the Jews by grace, why would they now think of adding any additional requirement for the salvation of Gentiles?

How might we allow prejudice to impact our presentation of the gospel?  
How do you feel knowing salvation is available to all who place their  
faith in Jesus? How does it impact your desire to share the gospel?

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## CLEAR EXPECTATIONS (ACTS 15:24-29)

After Peter's speech, the assembly heard Paul and Barnabas tell of all the marvelous works God had done through them among the Gentiles. This report was followed by a response from James, the brother of Jesus, who seems to have occupied a position of leadership among the elders of the church. If the Judaizers were expecting support from James, they were disappointed. He referred to Peter by his old name, Simeon, and referenced Peter's speech, concluding that "God first intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for his name" (v. 14). In other words, the new community of faith would display God's glory and be made of up Jews and Gentiles. James then fortified his argument with the words of the prophet Amos (vv. 16-18; see Amos 9:11-12).

James concluded that believers should avoid all attempts to impose circumcision or other legalistic obligations on Gentiles who responded to Christ. They had protected the essence of the gospel, but a practical problem remained. In most churches, Jewish and Gentile believers would live side by side, and many Jews would still desire to observe various food laws. Many Jewish believers still struggled with the idea of social contact with Gentiles, whom they they had formerly considered to be unclean. James suggested a plan that might help believers of Jewish birth. Gentile believers should avoid meat that had an association with idolatry or from which the blood had not been properly drained (see Gen. 9:4). Further, they should avoid sexual immorality. This suggestion must have found approval with the whole body of believers, because the apostles and elders wrote a letter affirming the decision and sent it along with representatives of Paul and Barnabas to the church in Antioch.

### VERSE 24

We now come to the content of the letter written by the Jerusalem Council. It was addressed to "the brothers and sisters among the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia" (v. 23). The council first addressed the events that precipitated the letter. The trouble over circumcision, that had caused concern among Gentile believers, had been created by people who had no **authorization** from the Jerusalem church. It is possible that those espousing circumcision had boasted that they had the authorization of Jerusalem. This statement clearly implied that the delegates bearing this letter were fully authorized by the church in Jerusalem.

## ACTS 15:24

<sup>24</sup> "Since we have heard that some without our authorization went out from us and troubled you with their words and unsettled your hearts,

## ACTS 15:25-29

<sup>25</sup> we have unanimously decided to select men and send them to you along with our dearly loved Barnabas and Paul,  
<sup>26</sup> who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>27</sup> Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who will personally report the same things by word of mouth. <sup>28</sup> For it was the Holy Spirit's decision—and ours—not to place further burdens on you beyond these requirements:

<sup>29</sup> 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.”

### VERSES 25-27

The decision of the Jerusalem church was unanimous. We must conclude that those in support of the Judaizers had been convinced by the speeches of Peter and James and by the evidence provided by the stories of Gentiles coming to Christ. The council selected delegates from Jerusalem to accompany Paul and Barnabas as they delivered the letter to the Gentile brethren in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. The reference to the **beloved Barnabas and Paul** and the note that they had **risksed their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ** would have further encouraged the Gentile believers. In verse 27, the two delegates are named (**Judas and Silas**), and their role was to give a verbal attestation to the decisions made by the council.

## The church is the vehicle of the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit, and He continues to guide its decisions.

### VERSES 28-29

It is most instructive that the Holy Spirit is mentioned when the council recounts how their decision was reached. It is clear that the church is the vehicle of the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit, and He continues to guide its decisions. The desire of the council was that they place no **further burdens** on the Gentiles beyond those things which were necessary for the unity of the body. The words of the letter are not couched in terms of a command, but more as an advisory note. They respected the autonomy of these predominately Gentile churches.

The necessary things from which they were to abstain are repeated from verse 20. The first is **food offered to idols**. You can find a more complete discussion of the issues related to idol meat in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. Meat offered to idols in a pagan temple would often make its way into the meat market. Eating meat which had any association with idolatry would have been offensive to Jewish believers. The prohibition of eating flesh with the **blood** still in it was based on Genesis 9:4: “you must not eat meat with its lifeblood in it.” The third provision had to do with **sexual immorality**. Many Gentile believers had been accustomed to the more lax pagan standards of sexual behavior and thus were called to a higher standard of living in Christ. The main issue being addressed in the letter was the interaction of the Jews and Gentiles when it came to table fellowship, which would have included the Lord's Supper.

**How does this passage demonstrate God's concern that His church includes people from every tribe, tongue, and nation? How does your church make it clear that its decision are guided by the Holy Spirit?**

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## SECURE ENCOURAGEMENT (ACTS 15:30-31)

The response to the letter is as anticipated. The Gentile believers rejoiced as the letter affirmed their spiritual walks.

### VERSE 30

This verse again reminds us that this was an official delegation which was being *sent off*. They traveled first to the church at **Antioch** that was responsible for sending Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey (see Acts 13:1-3). Once they arrived, they gathered the church and *delivered the letter*. Here again we are reminded that there was an identifiable group of people who the church considered to be a part of their assembly. In our day, many who confess Christ consider church membership optional; it is clear that early believers treasured their identity with the local church.

**It is clear that early believers treasured their identity with the local church.**

### VERSE 31

When the letter was read, the Gentile church was greatly encouraged and reacted joyously. We sometimes lose sight of opportunities we have to encourage fellow church members who are seeking answers to spiritual questions in their own lives. This passage gives us a good template for ministering to and encouraging others in their spiritual walk.

While this is the final verse in our focal passage, it is worth our time to finish out the paragraph by looking at verses 32-35. Judas and Silas, the representatives from Jerusalem, encouraged and strengthened the believers with a long message. (Some things never change!) Verse 33 seems to suggest that Judas and Silas found it difficult to leave their new friends. But after spending additional time with the believers in Antioch, “they were sent back in peace by the brothers and sisters to those who had sent them” (v. 33).

Some manuscripts include in verse 34 a statement which indicates Silas remained in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas remained there in Antioch, “teaching and proclaiming the word of the Lord” (v. 35). This final note is Luke’s way of affirming the continuing work of the Spirit. Having addressed the issue of how Gentiles could become part of the assembly, believers could continue to spread the gospel unhindered.

**How can we encourage others who are seeking answers to their spiritual questions?**

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### ACTS 15:30

<sup>30</sup> So they were sent off and went down to Antioch, and after gathering the assembly, they delivered the letter.

### ACTS 15:31

<sup>31</sup> When they read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**ILLUSTRATE:** Show the group the gift-wrapped package and identify its contents. Explain that the package is a gift of love. Although it was paid for by you, offer it completely free to a recipient in the group. Ask for a show of hands of those who would accept the gift and invite someone to step forward and receive it. Before that person can respond, however, add a stipulation: *Before you can receive this gift, you will need to lift that bag of potatoes (or apples, dumbbells, etc.) over your head and walk around the room.* If the person complies, reward them with the gift.

**QUERY:** *How did it make you feel when I offered a free gift to anyone who would receive it? How did it make you feel when I added another ludicrous step to receiving this gift?*

**TRANSITION:** Note that while God carefully planned, executed, and communicated the process of salvation, humanity has a penchant for trying to add on to God's free gift through Jesus Christ.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Acts 15:6-11, listening for the words that describe the process of salvation.

**DIRECT:** Point out the city of Antioch on **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*). Point also to the city of Jerusalem, noting that it is 250 miles from Antioch.

**AMPLIFY:** Share background information on the study, utilizing the material from *Understand the Context* (pp. 34–35; PSG, p. 29), and describe the dispute that had broken out in Antioch.

**MINI-LECTURE:** Drawing on the information from Acts 10, describe Peter's experience with Cornelius and his subsequent understanding of how the gospel extends to Gentiles. Invite a volunteer to read aloud Acts 10:34 to emphasize that Jews and Gentiles come to God the same way: through Christ.

**DISCOVER:** Direct the group's attention to the information under Verses 7-9 (PSG, pp. 30–31) to summarize the four points that Peter made when speaking to the church elders.

**ASK:** *What unbiblical stipulations are placed on people today before being accepted into a local church? How do those stipulations compare to what was being faced by the early church?* (PSG, p. 32)

**TRANSITION:** *Clearly Peter had already come full circle in his understanding of how different people groups are saved: the same way he was. Now it was time to help the believers in Antioch come to full understanding, too.*

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Acts 15:24-29, noting that this is a letter written to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia with direction from the Jerusalem Council.

**LIST:** Direct the readers to the PSG, page 32, under Clear Expectations to find the names of those who were included in the official delegation who helped deliver the letter: Paul, Barnabas, Barabbas (Judas), and Silas. Use **Pack Item 6** (*Poster: Paul's Missionary Team Members*), reading the information about Barnabas, Barabbas, and Silas.

**DESCRIBE:** Reread Acts 15:24-29 and draw the group's attention to the phrases that express how the Jews' attempted add-ons impacted the Gentiles.

**DISCERN:** Emphasize that most misunderstandings about salvation do not arise from the Bible, which clarifies doctrine, but human misinterpretations based upon incomplete reading of Scripture, traditions, or cultural expectations, which muddy understanding.

**FOCUS:** Note that the solution to church unrest over matters as important as the doctrine of salvation rely on the same inspiration.

**ASK:** *What standards should a church use when communicating appropriate ways of living out the Christian life today? (PSG, p. 34) What does the passage say guided the Jerusalem Council?*

**CLARIFY:** Draw the group's attention to the requirements the council had cited in the letter. Note that these were not requirements for salvation but standards that would help them maintain fellowship with Jews and adopt God's standards for Christian living.

**TRANSITION:** *These are not the kinds of commands that the Jews were trying to burden the Gentiles with but encouragement to live up to the salvation already available.*

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Acts 15:30-31 and listen as someone who would report on the delivery.

**ASK:** *Who delivered the letter? Where did they take it? Who heard it? What was the reaction of the listeners?*

**TRANSITION:** *What kinds of spiritual questions are being asked in the church today? How can the way a church handles conflict and potentially divisive spiritual questions be an encouragement to a community? (PSG, p. 35)*

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## **SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)**

**LIST:** Direct the group to identify and summarize the three bulleted points under In My Context from the PSG, page 36.

**RESPOND AND PRAY:** Call attention to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 36): *Review Acts 15:9. Ask God to reveal sinful distinctions you may make of other people. Confess any distinctions He reveals and begin to pray for the salvation of people you may know who are in the groups God reveals.*



## PRACTICE

- As the group leader, meditate on Acts 15:9 and, through prayer, determine if you have harbored distinctions in word or deed.
- Encourage the group to identify someone in their circle of acquaintances to whom they have consciously or unconsciously applied distinctions when it comes to salvation, whether because of the other person's sinfulness or their own prejudices. Challenge the group to reach out to those persons during the week with the intent of cultivating an opportunity to share the gospel.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an option for focusing attention on salvation for all, task the group with making a list of beliefs that may be considered “secondary” with those that are “non-negotiable”: *What beliefs are non-negotiable? How can a person decide which issues are secondary and which are non-negotiable?* (PSG, p. 28) Concentrate on the doctrine of salvation as a non-negotiable.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the study of Acts 15:6-11, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 31 of the PSG.
- To supplement understanding, lead the group to read the key doctrine on page 32 of the PSG. Lead them to respond to the doctrine and discuss the implications of it.
- To apply the model the Jerusalem Council presented, develop a plan of takeaways that could be applied in contemporary church settings.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Read Acts 10:34 and discuss the value of the entire church being present in resolving matters of church conflict. Call attention to the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 36): *Discuss how conflict is handled within your group. Identify lessons learned from this study about addressing conflict or maintaining unity in the church. What principles should your group or church follow in the future?*

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play the song “Who Am I,” by Casting Crowns. Suggest that the song is a reminder that the grace of God, which is extended in salvation through Jesus Christ, should humble each of us. When it does, we will not see any distinctions in others.

# THE PROMISED ONE

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

## LUKE 2:25-38

### MEMORY VERSE: LUKE 2:7

- **READ** Luke 2:1-40, First Thoughts (p. 44), and Understand the Context (pp. 44–45).
- **STUDY** Luke 2:25-38, using Explore the Text (pp. 45–49). As you study, try to imagine that you are first Simeon and then Anna. Putting aside the most obvious differences, could you see yourself reacting as they did to an encounter with the newborn Christ? Reflect on the timing involved in this event.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 50–51) and More Ideas (p. 52). Select some Christmas music to play softly during the session. If you decide to host a Christmas coffee as suggested, invite the group ahead of time.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog ([LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry](http://LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides;  A nativity scene; and  A cross of some type, whether artwork or sculpture. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). Prepare to display the following Pack Item:  **PACK ITEM 11** (*Poster: Luke 2:7*). For More Ideas, gather:  Sticky notes;  A device to play Christmas music; and  A box of Christmas cards that connects the birth of Jesus with the gospel message. If you cannot find a sample, design a card with both a manger and a cross and write your own: *We celebrate Christmas because there is Easter, too. Wishing you the hope found in the manger and the life to be gained through the cross.* Bring enough cards for every group member



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Salvation*

Salvation is offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, who by His own blood obtained eternal redemption for the believer.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "The Jewish World When Jesus Was Born" in the Winter 2017-2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

# FIRST THOUGHTS

Christmas just wouldn't be the same without music. Whether it's in restaurants, on street corners, or even in the office, there is just something special about Christmas music that adds to the experience. It just wouldn't be the same without the tune of "Silent Night" or some other familiar carol ringing in our heads.

(In PSG, p. 37) **Why is music such an important part of the Christmas season? What songs do you look forward to hearing during this time of the year?**

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Luke emphasized the music of the first Christmas. He recorded Mary's song in response to Elizabeth's blessing (Luke 1:46-55). He also recorded Zechariah's praise that follows the naming of his son John (1:68-79), the angelic multitude (Luke. 2:14), and finally Simeon's prophetic praise (2:29-32). This final song of the first Christmas will be our focus for this session.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

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

Let's return briefly to Paul's message delivered in Antioch of Pisidia in Acts 13. After a brief summary of Israel's history, Paul focused on the great King David, who was a man after God's heart. Paul declared, "From this man's descendants, as he promised, God brought to Israel the Savior, Jesus" (Acts 13:23). The promised and long-awaited Messianic Savior from David's house had been raised up by God, and His name was Jesus. Paul then placed the birth of Jesus in the context of historic events by referring to the popular ministry of John the Baptist. John's baptism of repentance was one which would pave the way for the coming kingdom and the ministry of Jesus (v. 24). Before John completed his public ministry, he made it clear that he was not the Messiah. In truth, he saw himself as so far beneath the Messiah that he did not consider himself fit to untie the laces of his sandals (v. 25).

Now to take a closer look at Jesus the Messiah, we will focus on Luke's narrative of that event and the witness of two ordinary people, Simeon and Anna, whom God chose to use in an extraordinary way. The larger context of our focal passage is the whole birth story as recorded in Luke 2.

Luke, the historian, begins by placing Jesus' birth in its larger historical context. A decree by Caesar Augustus caused every citizen of the empire to return to their own towns to be registered. In God's providence, this

event caused Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem because Joseph was of the house and family line of David. Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, fulfilling Micah's prophecy that a ruler of Israel would come out of Bethlehem whose "origin is from antiquity, from ancient times" (Mic. 5:2).

God chose to announce the birth of Christ to lowly shepherds, affirming that the Savior, "who is the Messiah the Lord," had been born in the city of David (Luke 2:11). After the angels serenaded the shepherds, the shepherds headed straight for Bethlehem to visit the child. They told the couple what the angels had announced to them. Mary treasured the message and began to meditate on the profound truths she was hearing about her son.

Luke 2:21-24 tells very briefly of two different events. The first was the circumcision of Jesus after the eight-day period, as specified to Abraham (see Gen. 17:10-14) and commanded in Leviticus 12:3. This demonstrated Jesus' solidarity with His own people. At the time of circumcision the child was officially named "Jesus," the name prescribed by the angel before His birth (Luke 1:31). The name means "Yahweh saves," emphasizing Jesus' work as Savior.

The second event occurred forty days after the birth of Jesus. Levitical law indicated that a woman, after the birth of a son, would be ceremonially unclean for the seven days leading up to the circumcision of the son on the eighth day. Further, she should continue in purification for thirty-three additional days. When the days for her purification were complete, she was to "bring to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting a year-old male lamb for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering" (Lev. 12:6). If the woman was too poor to offer a lamb, a second dove or pigeon could be substituted for the lamb (vv. 6-13). Mary's offering shows how the King of kings entered His own creation in poverty. The presentation of the Child at this time is based on Exodus 13:2 and 12, which required that the first born male be dedicated to the Lord.

It is at this point in the drama that two unknown but not insignificant characters make their appearance in the greatest drama enacted on earth. Simeon and Anna, who are mentioned in the Bible only once, were the first to give verbal testimony that the promised Messiah, the One who provides salvation to all who trust Him, had been born.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### SIMEON'S PRAISE (LUKE 2:25-32)

Simeon was a righteous and devout man who had lived in anticipation of the Messiah's coming. Luke makes it clear that the Holy Spirit directed this devout man's life. In a few short verses, Luke mentions the ministry of the Spirit three times. The Spirit was on Simeon, revealing to him that he would see Messiah before he died, and guiding him to the temple when the Christ child was present.

### BIBLE SKILL

*Evaluate your emotional response to a passage.*

Read Luke 2:29. What emotions do you sense as you read of Simeon's reaction to the babe in his arms? How was Simeon's contentment found in Jesus? How does Simeon's reaction reflect the reaction a person might have when they first express faith in Jesus?

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## LUKE 2:25

<sup>25</sup> 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.

## LUKE 2:26-28

<sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he saw the Lord's Messiah.

<sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him up in his arms, praised God, and said,

### VERSE 25

It is fascinating that we know nothing about **Simeon** apart from this one story. Yet his name and his declaration are still on our lips today. Luke indicates that God chose to use this previously unknown man because of qualities that made him a choice instrument. Despite the low spiritual condition of many of the Jewish people during this time, Simeon was genuinely pious and upright—he was a **righteous** man. The term **devout** is used only by Luke in the New Testament and indicates that Simeon was careful about his religious duties. Further, Simeon was **looking forward to Israel's consolation**. In other words, he lived in view of the Messiah's coming. Finally, **the Holy Spirit was on him**. In the Old Testament, we see the activity of the Spirit in peoples' lives, but God only gave the Spirit for special occasions and events. While it was not yet possible for people to be "filled with the Spirit" in the New Testament sense until after Jesus' ascension and the Spirit's coming at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was uniquely on Simeon. These qualities that led God to choose Simeon assure us that his testimony is reliable.

### VERSES 26-28

**It had been revealed** to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that Simeon would see the Lord's Messiah during his lifetime. It is interesting that we often think of Simeon as an old man, based primarily on verse 29 where he declared that God could now dismiss him in peace. While that may be a reference to his **death**, the truth is we have no clue as to Simeon's age. No matter how old he was, he had lived in anticipation because he was sensitive to the voice of the Spirit and fully relied on God's promise that he would live to see the Messiah.

**He had lived with anticipation because he was sensitive to the voice of the Spirit and fully relied on the promise of God.**

The timing of Simeon's entry into the temple court was also **guided by the Spirit**. Simeon was a man with unusual spiritual sensitivity. We must wonder how often we miss grand spiritual occasions because we are not carefully attuned to the voice of the Spirit. When Simeon saw the parents with the baby in their arms, he recognized the Messiah, took the child **in his arms**, and began a song of praise to the Lord.

### VERSES 29-32

Some commentators declare that this short burst of praise is as beautiful as any of the psalms of praise in the Old Testament. Notice that Simeon began with a grand view of God, whom he declared to be **Master**. Further, he rightly acknowledged his own response as that of a faithful **servant** who had fulfilled his duty. The imagery is that of a servant tasked with keeping watch through a long dark night, waiting to herald the appearance of a special bright star. Now that the Messiah had appeared, Simeon knew that

his role was complete and the Master could **dismiss** his servant. The use of the word *dismiss* could be understood to mean either the servant's death or the freeing of the servant from a prescribed task. The phrase **as you promised** is a reference to the faithfulness of God's promise that Simeon would see the Messiah in his lifetime (see v. 26).

What did Simeon see when he looked in the face of Jesus? He declared, **for my eyes have seen your salvation**. But his eyes saw far more than what many anticipated. He didn't see a redeemer who would bring the Jews political freedom from the hated Romans. No, he saw what God had prepared **in the presence of all peoples—a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel**.

(In PSG, p. 41) **How do people view Jesus today? How do these views compare to Simeon's understanding of who Jesus is?**

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The phrase **in the presence of all peoples** widens the scope of God's redemptive plan, as verse 32 makes clear. Christ is the Redeemer for Jews and Gentiles alike. God's plan of salvation embraces all peoples. Darkness throughout Scripture is a symbol of sin, misery, ignorance, judgment, and death. To dispel the darkness there is now **a light**. Though He came through the Jewish people, the Savior is for all mankind.

This light to the Gentiles would in no way diminish the glory to God's people Israel. On the contrary, **glory**, which is the manifest presence of God on display throughout the Old Testament, would now be seen in its fullest expression in the life and ministry of Jesus (see John 1:14).

## God is looking for similar people today to be instruments in His grand plan.

What grabs my attention in this section is God's use of ordinary people in a most extraordinary way. Mary, Joseph, and Simeon were relative unknown. They were chosen by God because they were faithful in the little things. Mary and Joseph were in the temple on this particular day because they were obedient to do all that was customary under the law. Simeon was there because he was sensitive to the Spirit's leading. God is looking for similar people today to be instruments in His grand plan.

### A FUTURE PIERCING (LUKE 2:33-35)

Simeon's pronouncement amazed the young couple. After he pronounced blessing upon Mary and Joseph, he faithfully delivered the message that Jesus' ministry would bring opposition and cause division among the Jewish people. Further, events in Jesus' life would cause great pain for Mary.

### LUKE 2:29-32

<sup>29</sup> Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace, as you promised.

<sup>30</sup> For my eyes have seen your salvation.

<sup>31</sup> You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples— <sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel.

## LUKE 2:33

<sup>33</sup> His father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

## LUKE 2:34-35

<sup>34</sup> 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—<sup>35</sup> and a sword will pierce your own soul—that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

### VERSE 33

You may find it odd that Joseph and Mary would be **amazed** by Simeon’s pronouncement. Angelic messengers had visited both Mary and Joseph and informed them about the miraculous birth of the Messiah (Luke 1:26-38). When the shepherds visited the manger and told about the angelic declaration, Mary treasured their message and meditated upon it (2:19). Mary and Joseph were still trying to grasp the full significance of the coming of the Messiah and their role in this drama. Thus the actions and words of Simeon caused deep amazement. Perhaps it was the additional information concerning the universal mission of their son that gave them a clearer understanding of the divine majesty of the child.

### VERSES 34-35

Simeon acknowledged the glorious privilege that had come to this young couple and gave them his blessing. Yet, with the blessing came an unexpected message. Simeon prophesied concerning the coming struggle and suffering that the birth of the Messiah would cause. **Indeed this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed.** He would be like a rock which would cause some to stumble and others to rise up. Peter used the same imagery when he referred to Jesus as a cornerstone for some and a rock of stumbling for others (1 Pet. 2:6-8). It all depends on a people’s responses to Jesus. Those who rely on their own works and reject His offer of grace will fall over Jesus and His message. But the Lord will raise up the humble who bow at His feet and claim His unmerited grace. With Christ, there can be no neutral ground. His life, message, and sacrificial death serves as a clear sign that there is salvation in Christ alone.

Some would oppose Christ, culminating in His crucifixion. It was this resistance that caused Mary deepest sorrow, as if a **sword** was piercing her **own soul**. The crisis that was created by the coming of the Messiah would result in **the thoughts of many hearts** being **revealed**. People’s responses to Jesus reveal the inmost response of their hearts. God, who knows our hearts, will bring judgment by the appearance of the Christ. He will cause a clear division between those who truly serve Him and those who reject Him.

**How does the message of the coming of Christ cause division today? Does the knowledge of this help you understand why some will reject your witness?**

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## ANNA’S AFFIRMATION (LUKE 2:36-38)

We now meet our second witness. She is an unknown, a woman, and a widow. She was clearly devout and was “looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (v. 38). It is fascinating that in a society and culture that was

primarily focused on the witness of men, God choose to use this righteous widow to declare the good news to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

#### VERSES 36-37

Anna was another pious person whom God led to the temple at just the right moment to witness the Christ child in the temple. Anna was a prophetess like Deborah (Judg. 4:4) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14) from Old Testament times. The tribe of Asher was one of the ten tribes of the North, the so-called lost tribes. Thus it seems possible that some members of these tribes had returned to full membership among God's people. There had not been any prophets in Israel for hundreds of years, so it is noteworthy that God would raise up a prophetess to bear witness to His Son.

### How long are we willing to pray without losing hope?

She had only been married for **seven years** when she became a widow. She had either been a widow for **eighty-four years** or she was now a widow who was eighty-four years old. Both are possible. But the emphasis is not on her age, it is on the length of her devotion to the Lord. The indication that she **did not leave the temple** complex but served God **night and day** may suggest she was given a room in one of the buildings on temple hill. In any case, what is clear is that she was exceptionally faithful in ministering in the temple and was a woman of prayer. The context seems to suggest that one aspect of her prayer life was related to the coming of the Messiah. How long are we willing to pray without losing hope?

#### VERSE 38

**At that very moment** again suggests clear guidance by the Spirit. Even though Anna was regularly in the temple, God guided her to the right place at just the right time. When God opened her eyes to the truth that she had beheld the Redeemer, she spoke with gratitude and praise about God **to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem**. Good news cannot be contained. When this pious woman of prayer saw her prayers answered, her first reaction was to thank God and tell others. It is also interesting to note that there were others who were looking for God's redemption.

**What do you think is the connection between Anna's prayer life and the privilege God gave her to see the Redeemer in person? Do we miss profound events because of our failure to persevere in prayer?**

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#### LUKE 2:36-37

<sup>36</sup> 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, <sup>37</sup> and was a widow for eighty-four years. She did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers.

#### LUKE 2:38

<sup>38</sup> 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.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**ENHANCE:** Draw on the importance of music in Christmas celebrations as well as today's study by playing Christmas tunes softly during the session. Suggest that song, just as recorded in the passage to be studied, is often a spontaneous expression of deep emotions and a powerful way to help others express their feelings.

**SURVEY:** Point out the nativity scene that you set up, along with a cross, or depict both on a whiteboard. Ask for a show of hands to determine which, the cross or the manger, the group is more likely to see around town, in their neighborhood, and in their own homes.

**STRESS:** *The manger is the symbol of Jesus' birth, and the cross is the symbol of His death.*

**QUERY:** *How often do you see the manger and the cross connected? How important is it that we do?*

**EXPLAIN:** *The birth of Jesus was just the miraculous beginning, and the challenge for the church is to connect the two. But first, let's go before Jesus' birth to the ministry of John the Baptist.*

**HIGHLIGHT:** Invite the group to draw on their Bible knowledge to find similarities and differences between the missions of John the Baptist and Jesus. Share from the background information under Understand the Context (pp. 44–45; PSG, pp. 38–39) to fill in the gaps.

**TRANSITION:** Read the first paragraph on page 39 of the PSG.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud Luke 2:25-32, while the group listens for the words that describe Simeon.

**SURVEY:** *What does the passage we just read tell you about this man called Simeon?* If necessary, reread the passage to refresh their memories.

**DEFINE:** Talk about the consolation that Simeon sought. Refer to the information under Verses 25–26 in the PSG (pp. 39–40) to give the group a full picture of Simeon.

**DELIBERATE:** Note the promise made to Simeon by the Holy Spirit and how much he took it to heart. Identify why Simeon was selected for this promise and the deep faith required to live with such expectancy.

**ASK:** *Describe what it meant for Simeon to have the Holy Spirit.*

**RECITE:** Ask the group to read verses 29-32 aloud together, noting that Simeon recognized Jesus as the Messiah, picked Him up in his arms, and broke into song. If you have someone musical in your group, consider inviting that person to sing the verses.

**TRANSITION:** *How do people view Jesus today? How do these views compare to Simeon's understanding of who Jesus is?* (PSG, p. 41)

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Luke 2:33-35, trying to put themselves in the shoes of Joseph and Mary.

**DISCUSS:** Propose emotions that may have gone through the couple as they listened to Simeon: amazement, wonder, fear, and trepidation. Simeon's comments to Mary were especially poignant: her newborn Son would live an extraordinary life—and it would cause her great pain.

**ELABORATE:** Explain the ways that Mary would suffer as Jesus fulfilled His mission. Use information on Verses 34-35 (p. 48; PSG, p. 42) to supplement the discussion of Mary.

**CONNECT:** Link the sword that Simeon said would penetrate Mary's soul to the one that slices open all human hearts. Call on a volunteer to read Luke 5:22.

**ASK:** *Why do many people focus on the birth of Jesus but ignore His death? How does focusing on the birth while ignoring His mission and death affirm Simeon's words to Mary?* (PSG, p. 43)

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Luke 2:36-38 while the group listens for descriptors of Anna.

**PORTRAY:** Create a biography of Anna using the group's gleanings from the passage. Talk about why Luke, guided by the Holy Spirit, may have included such interesting details.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Guide the group to read the last paragraph from the PSG, page 44, under Verse 38. Discuss the ordinary qualities of Simeon and Anna, as well as the extraordinary spiritual qualities they displayed.

**ASK:** *What is the connection between praising God and sharing Christ with others? Can there be a powerful witness if there is no worship?* (PSG, p. 44)

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**GUIDE:** Draw the group's attention back to the manger scene and the cross. Point out that no matter how beloved and wondrous the story of Jesus' birth, the manger is meaningless if the story never continues to the cross.

**REVIEW:** Invite three volunteers to each read a bulleted statement under In My Context (PSG, p. 45). Suggest that connecting the manger to the cross begins with praising God for the gift of Jesus. Draw the group's attention to **Pack Item 11** (*Poster: Luke 2:7*), this session's memory verse, and encourage them to recite Luke 2:7 together. Then guide them to write a paragraph of praise.

**DISTRIBUTE:** Hand out copies of **Pack Item 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*) and challenge participants to continue memorizing Scripture each week.

**RESPOND:** Call attention to the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 45): *As a group, list ways a person could remind others of the mission of Jesus. How can Christmas be used to point others to Easter and God's gift of salvation through faith in Jesus? Take one idea shared and put together a plan for taking that action in the next twenty-four hours.*

**PRAY:** Invite volunteers to share their praises aloud with the entire group in prayer. Start the prayer with your own words of praise and then allow others to add theirs. Close the prayer at an appropriate interval.



## PRACTICE

- As the group leader, consider planning and hosting a Christmas coffee or other rather informal gathering later that day where the group may invite their friends. Be prepared to share the birth—and death—of Christ.
- During the week, text or email each of the group members with additional words of praise and expectancy for the gift of Jesus' eternal life.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an option for focusing attention on the end message of Christmas, which is Easter, prepare a large paper or wood cross and distribute several sticky notes to each group member. Position a nativity scene under the cross. Task the group with writing key words from the Scripture and the emotions the verses provoke in them on sticky notes to add to the cross throughout the session.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of Luke 2:29, guide participants to work in pairs and complete the Bible Skill activity on page 41 of the PSG.
- After reading the first passage about Simeon, invite the group to post descriptors that stood out to them that they want to apply to their own lives and place on the horizontal part of the cross.
- After reading the passage about Anna, invite the group to post descriptors that stood out to them that they want to apply to their own lives and place on the horizontal part of the cross.
- To highlight the importance of praise, invite the group to record words or phrases that stood out to them in the Scripture passage or think of their own and fill in the entire vertical section of the cross.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Draw attention back to the cross, now filled with words that depict the ardent faithful and their praises with the manger scene set below it. Note that even though the birth of Jesus is a starting point, the ending point is His death and resurrection. Challenge your group never to let the manger overshadow the cross but to create opportunities to faithfully connect the two. Distribute the Christmas cards that you purchased or display the one you designed to connect the birth of Christ with the gospel. Share the cards with the group and encourage them to send a card to someone who is lost during the next week.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Lead the group in a medley of favorite Christmas carols. Be sure to suggest ones that focus on praise and adoration: "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing," by Charles Wesley, "Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come," by Isaac Watts, or "O Come, All Ye Faithful," by John Francis Wade.

# STRENGTHENED

God strengthens His church through His faithful servants.

## ACTS 15:36-41; 16:1-5

### MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 16:5

- **READ** Acts 1:1–4:31, First Thoughts (p. 54), and Understand the Context (pp. 54–55).
- **STUDY** Acts 15:36-41; 16:1-5, using Explore the Text (pp. 55–59). As you study, follow the directions in the PSG (p. 47): *Outline the result associated with each action identified in these verses. How are the results connected? Could the final result identified in 16:5 have happened without each previous action?*
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 60–61) and More Ideas (p. 62). Compile a list of cities mentioned in the study to display on a whiteboard or notepad. If you elect to use the option under More Ideas, gather a list of discipleship and evangelism ministries offered through your church, association, and state convention.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides;  A whiteboard/paper and markers; and  Pushpins or stickers.  Prepare the whiteboard by adding the label “Mission” at the top. Under that include two columns labeled “Missionaries” and “Locations.” At the bottom write the label “Outcome.” Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul’s Missionary Journeys*);  **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline of Acts*);  **PACK ITEM 6** (*Poster: Paul’s Missionary Team Members*); and  **PACK ITEM 7** (*Poster: Key Cities in Paul’s Journeys*).



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Cooperation*

Members of New Testament churches should cooperate with one another in carrying forward the missionary, educational, and benevolent ministries for the extension of Christ's kingdom.

## FIRST THOUGHTS

God chooses to use ordinary people to accomplish His purposes. He invites His people to play a role in expanding His kingdom. He allows us to be His partner with others who He also invites to work with Him. He brings people together who will make a greater impact than they could have made by themselves.

(In PSG, p. 46) **How do you respond to the idea that God invites people to be a part of His work? In what ways does this excite and scare people at the same time?**

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As we study God's Word, we become acutely aware that He chooses to work through human instruments. For example, when God wanted to redeem the righteous before the flood, He selected Noah to build the ark and become an instrument of His earthly activity. He worked through people like Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and the judges. God has chosen to accomplish His kingdom activity on earth by taking ordinary people and empowering them to do extraordinary things.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Silas, the Leader and Missionary," an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Winter 2017-2018 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### ACTS 15:36-16:15

The Book of Acts traces the expansion of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The ever-expanding mission did not simply require the crossing of geographical borders; it required crossing cultural and racial barriers. At this point in the Acts account, we are observing the penetration of the gospel into the Gentile world. After the success of the first missionary journey and the conversion of many Gentiles, it became necessary for there to be a clear understanding of what was necessary for a Gentile to come to faith in Christ. There were some people from Jewish backgrounds who felt that Gentiles must first be circumcised in order to accept the Jewish Messiah.

**The ever-expanding mission did not simply require crossing geographical borders; it required crossing cultural and racial barriers.**

The question came before the church at Jerusalem, and they decided it was unnecessary for Gentiles to submit to circumcision; Jews and Gentiles alike are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus (15:11). In order to

make it possible for Jews and Gentiles to fellowship together in the same community, Gentiles were asked to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, and from meat with blood in it (15:20). With this clarification, the door was cast wide open for the movement of the gospel to the ends of the earth. But the question remained: who would be God’s human instruments in this kingdom-sized task?

We have been following the missionary activity of Paul and Barnabas since the church at Antioch commissioned them (13:3). Barnabas had been instrumental in introducing Paul to the disciples in Jerusalem when many still feared the former persecutor (Acts 9:26). Further, Barnabas was the instrument God used to bring Paul to Antioch where the two of them discipled new believers. They were companions on the first missionary journey, but in this section they part ways over John Mark, and thus God formed two missionary teams. We will follow Paul’s team as they visit five key cities—Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus.

### Profile of John Mark (In PSG, p. 49)

- *Writer of the Second Gospel*
- *Son of Mary, in whose house the Jerusalem church met (Acts 12:12)*
- *Barnabas’s cousin (Col. 4:10)*
- *Companion of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:38)*
- *Cause of a split between Paul and Barnabas when he left them during the first missionary journey (Acts 15:39)*
- *Was with Paul when the apostle wrote Colossians (Col. 4:10)*
- *Referred to by Paul as “useful to me in the ministry” (2 Tim. 4:11)*
- *Described by Paul as a coworker (Philem. 24)*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### PARTING WAYS (ACTS 15:36-39)

#### VERSES 36-38

Paul desired to make a second visit to the churches established during the first missionary journey to **see how they’re doing**. In other words, the missionaries were checking on the spiritual progress of the churches. No doubt, Paul wanted to share the news of the Jerusalem council’s decision related to the salvation of Gentiles and the behaviors that would strengthen the relationship between the Jews and Gentiles. Barnabas agreed with Paul’s plan but requested that they take John Mark, his cousin, with them. Paul thought it was inappropriate to take a man who had deserted them in Pamphylia (see Acts 13:13). Paul may have believed that Mark’s departure revealed a character defect that disqualified him from the ministry.

### BIBLE SKILL

*Compare similar passages.*

Genesis 13:5-13 records a disagreement between Abram and Lot. Review the passage in Genesis and compare it to the conflict Paul and Barnabas faced. How are the stories similar? How are they different? What principles can we learn from both stories?

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## ACTS 15:36-39

<sup>36</sup> 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.”  
<sup>37</sup> Barnabas wanted to take along John Mark.  
<sup>38</sup> 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. <sup>39</sup> They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed off to Cyprus.

### VERSE 39

The disagreement between the two missionaries was *sharp*. It is fascinating that Luke did not gloss over the dispute between these two friends and fellow-servants. This is simply another evidence of the integrity and authenticity of God’s Word. If we were writing church history, we might have been tempted to gloss over the event, but not so the Holy Spirit. This should cause us to pay particular attention to this account and see what God is trying to teach us.

There are some commentators who think that there may have been issues at work beyond the disagreement over John Mark. Galatians 2:11-14 records an event that might have created a bit of distance between Paul and Barnabas. Cephas had visited Antioch and had originally enjoyed table fellowship with the Gentile believers. However, when some men from the circumcision party had visited Antioch Cephas declined to eat with the Gentiles because he feared the Jews. Listen as Paul describes the results of Peter’s hypocritical behavior. “Then the rest of the Jews joined his hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy” (Gal. 2:13). It is certainly possible that this event may have been in the background when these two men decided to part company as missionaries.

Yet there is more to the story. Barnabas means “son of encouragement.” As indicated earlier, he was the man God used to introduce the recently converted Paul to the other disciples and to bring him to Antioch. It seems likely that Barnabas saw promising qualities in the young John Mark that he felt could be developed under his tutelage.

If we glance into the future, we find that Barnabas’s investment in John Mark paid off. Paul mentioned John Mark in the closing of the Colossian letter and instructed the Colossian believers to welcome him were he able to visit them. In Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy he requested that Timothy bring Mark to visit him in prison, “for he is useful to me in the ministry” (2 Tim. 4:11). In Philemon 24, Paul described Mark as his co-worker. As far as Paul’s relationship to Barnabas, Paul mentioned himself and Barnabas as missionary partners in 1 Corinthians 9:6.

Even though the two friends had a sharp disagreement, God worked in these events to expand His kingdom. Barnabas and John Mark went to Cyprus while Paul and Silas traveled through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. This is the last reference to Barnabas in Acts, and Luke shifts his focus to Paul and his missionary team. Paul and Barnabas both had legitimate reasons for excluding or including John Mark in their work. Both were faithful to their call and, as a result, God doubled His mission force.

**Being faithful to God’s purpose in our lives will play a role in our decision-making processes and our personal growth. Have you ever been involved in a disagreement that God used to multiply His work force?**

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

Often we don't fully discern the activity of God until we see it in retrospect. Because of the disagreement with Barnabas over Mark, Paul and Silas began their work together. Before long, they added a third member to their team, Timothy, who in time would become one of Paul's most trusted coworkers.

### VERSES 40-41

With the departure of Barnabas with John Mark, Paul **chose Silas** as his partner for the second missionary journey. You may recall that Silas was one of the representatives that the Jerusalem church sent to Antioch to explain the decision of the council concerning the conversion of Gentiles (Acts 15:22). Several factors made Silas a good choice for the upcoming mission. Based on Acts 16:38, Silas was a Roman citizen. It would have been difficult for Paul to claim his citizenship privileges if his partner had not also been a Roman citizen. Second, it is clear that Silas was well respected by the church in Jerusalem. Luke referred to Judas and Silas as "leading men among the brothers" (15:22). Paul and Silas were **commended by the brothers and sisters** in Antioch **to the grace of the Lord**. This suggests a commissioning service by the church similar to the one described in Acts 13:3.

Paul and Silas traveled **through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches**. It seems likely that Paul had been instrumental in establishing these churches (Gal. 1:21). Luke does not mention whether Paul delivered the letter from Jerusalem, but that seems probable.

### CHAPTER 16; VERSES 1-2

From Cilicia, Paul's route would take him over the Taurus range through the Cilician Gates to **Derbe**. He had now entered the province of Galatia to revisit cities where Paul and Barnabas had evangelized some two to three years earlier. It is likely that Timothy, along with his mother and grandmother, had been among Paul's earliest converts in this area. Luke mentions only that Timothy was the son of a Greek man whose Jewish wife had become a believer. According to 1 Timothy 1:5, Timothy's grandmother Lois was first converted, followed by His mother Eunice. Further, it seems to suggest that these two women had been instrumental in discipling Timothy.

Timothy had clearly grown in the faith and **the brothers and sisters at Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him**. We can learn more of Timothy's spiritual growth by giving attention to some of Paul's letters which mention his work with Paul. The First Letter to the Corinthians has a strong corrective tone to it, and thus Paul sent Timothy to Corinth to remind them of what Paul taught and practiced in his own life. By way of introduction, Paul referred to Timothy as his beloved and faithful child in the Lord (1 Cor. 4:17). In the final chapter of First Corinthians, Paul exhorted the Corinthians not to give Timothy any reason to fear, and Paul wrote that they should send Timothy on to Paul, who was expecting him (1 Cor. 16:10-11). Paul listed Timothy as the co-writer of the Second Letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:1). Paul had great confidence in Timothy

### ACTS 15:40-41

<sup>40</sup> But Paul chose Silas and departed, after being commended by the brothers and sisters to the grace of the Lord. <sup>41</sup> He traveled through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

### ACTS 16:1-2

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> The brothers and sisters at Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him.

and sent him as his emissary to encourage various churches (Phil. 2:19; 1 Thess. 3:2-6). Two of the Pastoral Letters are addressed to Timothy, whom Paul dearly loved and referred to as his true child in the faith (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2) and dearly loved.

### Profile of Timothy (In PSG, p. 51)

- *Friend and trusted coworker of Paul (Phil. 2:19-22)*
- *Had a believing Jewish mother and Greek father (Acts 16:1)*
- *A native of Lystra; well respected by believers there (Acts 16:2)*
- *Was taught the Scriptures by his mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15)*
- *May have been converted on Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 14:6-23)*
- *Paul required him to be circumcised (Acts 16:3).*
- *Recipient of two of Paul's letters (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2)*

### ACTS 16:3

<sup>3</sup> 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.

### VERSE 3

Since Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him on the remainder of his missionary journey, he had him **circumcised**. You may wonder why Paul required Timothy to be circumcised since the Jerusalem council did not require it and he did not require Titus, a Greek, to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3). First, we should note that there is no evidence that Paul ever opposed a Jew from being circumcised if he desired to do so. Paul simply rejected any imposition of circumcision on a Gentile convert because it could be misunderstood in terms of works-based salvation.

Timothy fell into an unusual category. In the eyes of Jews, he was virtually a Gentile since he was the uncircumcised son of a Greek. However, in the eyes of many Gentiles, he was practically a Jew, having been raised in his mother's religion. It was this mixed parentage that prompted Paul to have Timothy circumcised. By having Timothy circumcised, Paul normalized his status as a circumcised Jew who had become a follower of Jesus.

### Paul wanted to present the gospel in a manner that would best communicate in each unique situation.

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 we gain further insight into Paul's decision to have Timothy circumcised. Paul spoke of his willingness to become like a Jew to win the Jews and like a Gentile to win Gentiles. The bottom line is found in the second half of verse 22: "I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some." Paul was not suggesting that he was an evangelistic chameleon; he was simply willing to put aside his rights and preferences for the sake of the gospel. Paul wanted to present the gospel in a manner that would best communicate in each unique situation. Thus, by circumcising Timothy who had been raised in a Jewish context, he would make him a more effective missionary partner.

It is important for believers to find partners to assist them in ministry. How can we find people of like mind to join us in our ministry? What are some ways we can incorporate the principle of “becoming all things in order to win some?”

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## GROWTH SEEN (ACTS 16:4-5)

Paul and his new mission team traveled through the towns delivering the good news about the Jerusalem council’s decision concerning the conversion of Gentiles. Further, Paul and his team also strengthened the existing churches and evangelized unbelievers.

### VERSE 4

Paul shared the decision made by the Jerusalem council to encourage the Gentile believers and to open the way for further gospel expansion. The phrase **they delivered** may actually suggest that copies had been made of the Jerusalem council’s decision, and they left these with the churches as Paul made his visits. It is also significant to note that if Paul wrote Galatians before the decree of the Jerusalem council, which seems likely, the letter from the Jerusalem council would give further credibility to Paul’s argument in his Galatian letter.

### VERSE 5

This verse summarized the account of the Jerusalem council and opens the account of Luke’s travel with Paul’s missionary team. You will begin to notice a plural pronoun “we” throughout the remainder of Acts as Luke joined the missionary team. Luke frequently used these summary statements to help readers see the ongoing activity of the Lord. You might want to compare this summary to the one found in 2:47 and 6:7.

Luke gives us two specific, interrelated consequences of Paul’s visit with these churches. First the churches were **strengthened in the faith**. They were not only encouraged, but they also grew deeper spiritually. This maturation of the believers had a natural and consequential evangelistic impact, and the churches **grew daily in numbers**. The attempt by some to separate evangelism and discipleship is not supported by Scripture. When people or churches grow in maturity there should be an increase in their evangelistic effectiveness.

**Have you seen and experienced this inextricable linking of spiritual growth and evangelistic effectiveness? Can we claim spiritual maturity that does not lead to greater evangelistic activity? Explain.**

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## ACTS 16:4-5

<sup>4</sup> As they traveled through the towns, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem for the people to observe.

<sup>5</sup> So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**INTRODUCE:** Lead the group to name ways God has used an ordinary person in your life to minister to you during a difficult time. Ask: *How do you respond to the idea that God invites people to be a part of His work? In what ways does this excite and scare people at the same time?* (PSG, p. 46)

**TRANSITION:** *As we study today about faithful servants in the church, keep in mind that while Paul, Barnabas, John Mark, Silas, and Timothy became legends for their faith, they were, in the context of their time, simply ordinary men.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Acts 15:36-39, while another volunteer listens for and diagrams Barnabas' new partnership, drawing lines to the locations where they journeyed.

**DIRECT:** Point out the various locales on **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*) and mark the map with pushpins or stickers.

**LIST:** Write the names of the persons featured in the session study on a whiteboard or notepad: Paul, Barnabas, John Mark, Silas, Timothy. Add the names of the cities that will be mentioned: Cyprus, Cilicia, Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. Draw attention to **Pack Item 7** (*Poster: Key Cities in Paul's Journeys*). Read aloud information in the pack item about the cities involved in this session.

**CONNECT:** Note that the men will, in one way or another, impact all the cities listed and, presumably, many people in them.

**PONDER:** Talk about the rift between Paul and Barnabas and their argument over John Mark. Discuss whether such conflicts should be considered normal or atypical, unacceptable or unavoidable.

**EXPAND:** Refer to the references to Acts 13:13 and Galatians 2:11-14 for more information (PSG, pp. 48-49). Ask volunteers to read 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; and Colossians 4:10 for a full picture of Paul and John Mark's relationship. Direct a volunteer to read the information on John Mark on **Pack Item 6** (*Poster: Paul's Missionary Team Members*). Point out that Paul is the more legendary of the two men as an apostle, missionary, and writer of 13 New Testament books, but John Mark penned the Gospel of Mark and also made valuable contributions in the early church.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Draw the group's attention back to the fact that despite their differences, neither Paul nor Barnabas abandoned their mission. Instead, they split up and worked on the task with additional partners.

**TRANSITION:** *What did Paul and Barnabas understand about God's call and purpose in their lives? How did that understanding impact their decision to part ways?* (PSG, p. 50)

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Acts 15:40-16:3, while another diagrams Paul's new partnerships and draws lines to the locations they visited.

**PINPOINT:** Use **Pack Item 2** (*Outline of Acts*) to identify the various locales on **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*) and then mark each location. Emphasize the benefits of multiplied efforts when former partners Paul and Barnabas created their own teams.

**ENLIGHTEN:** Drawing on commentary from under Verse 3 in the PSG (p. 52), put Paul's requirement for Timothy to be circumcised in context. Call on a volunteer to read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 for an understanding of the lengths that Paul advocated in order to remove barriers to the gospel and become more effective.

**TRANSITION:** *Why was it important for Paul to assemble a team that would work well with him? How did the background of each man make him an asset to the team?* (PSG, p. 52) Refer back to **Pack Item 6** (*Poster: Paul's Missionary Team Members*) as needed to fill in gaps.

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read Acts 16:4-5 while another writes the phrases that communicate the outcome of the mission.

**NOTE:** Point out that the missionaries delivered letters from the Jerusalem Council in the cities they visited, which reassured the Gentile believers and removed additional barriers to the gospel.

**EXPLAIN:** Point to the act of delivering the Jerusalem Council's message as a form of discipleship. Note that the missionaries were not just delivering an edict but helping the churches to grow in their faith.

**DEFINE:** Underline the word *strengthen* on the board. Lead the group to identify ways the early church was strengthened.

**TRANSITION:** Call on a volunteer to read the last paragraph under Verse 5 in the PSG (p. 53). Emphasize the continuing multiplying effect of more believers sharing their faith. *What is the relationship between evangelism and discipleship? Can you have one without the other? Explain. What kind of balance should be struck between evangelism and discipleship in your life?* (PSG, p. 53)

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**DIAGRAM:** Draw the group's attention back to the whiteboard and add an X beside or under every city name to stand for the multiplying number of believers in every city. Continue adding one X at a time until the entire space is filled.

**CONTRAST:** Compare the limited number of original missionaries with the number of Christians, noting that it was a number which continues to grow today. Discuss the role every believer plays in strengthening the church and adding to it.

**CHALLENGE:** Call attention to the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 54): *Evaluate your involvement in evangelism and discipling other believers. In which one of these two activities are you more invested? What actions will you take to be more involved in evangelism and discipleship?*

**PRAY:** Encourage the group to spend a quiet moment reflecting on their personal responses to that question. Follow the time of reflection with a prayer for God to lead and direct each person to the opportunities that already exist or need to be created.



## PRACTICE

- Early in the next week, email the group and invite them to share ideas for partnering with another group or church for a special discipleship/evangelism event during the quarter. Consider creating a group text or email for easier access.
- Follow up on their suggestions by contacting one of the groups/churches suggested and inviting their input.
- Report back to the group via email on the feasibility of the proposed project.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an option for focusing attention on how God uses ordinary people—in both cooperation and division—to accomplish His purposes, bring attention to a ministry that has produced extensive results in your area. Also highlight a church conflict or split that ended up with more people being evangelized. Finally, draw attention to a pastor or church member with very humble beginnings and ministry who has had a significant impact for Christ.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- After reading the first passage about Paul and Barnabas' disagreement in Acts 15:36-39, incorporate the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 50) to give the group a broader understanding of the nature of disagreements that arise between well-intentioned brothers and sisters in Christ.
- After reading about Timothy in Acts 16:3, invite the group to identify and make a list of personal barriers that they could remove in order to share the gospel.
- Amplify the aspect of discipleship and evangelism by putting together and distributing a list of discipleship and evangelism opportunities offered through your church, association, or state convention.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Encourage members of the group to review the list you have compiled of discipleship and evangelism opportunities and commit to one of them during the year.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

To get to the heart of the matter and communicate the motivation that Paul and his missionary partners had on their journey, play the song "People Need the Lord," by Steve Green.

# A CHANGED FAMILY

God uses our influence to lead others to Him.

## ACTS 16:22-34

**MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 16:31**

- **READ** Acts 16:16–17:15, First Thoughts (p. 64), and Understand the Context (pp. 64–65).
- **STUDY** Acts 16:32-44, using Explore the Text (pp. 65–69). For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com). As you study, follow the directions in the PSG on page 57: *Notice the attitudes toward Paul and Silas before, during, and after their arrest. How do the attitudes compare?*
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 70–71). Modify your group plans using More Ideas (p. 72) and ideas online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras). Consider how to emphasize this session’s memory verse (Acts 16:31).
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog ([LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry](http://LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides; and  A whiteboard and markers. Prepare the whiteboard by adding the labels “Actor” and “Actions.” Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). Prepare to display the following Pack Item:  **PACK ITEM 12** (*Poster: Acts 16:31*). For More Ideas, gather:  Several small candles with drip guards or flashlights for each person in the group; and  Dark paper or a tarp and tape to cover any windows where your group meets.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Family*

A husband has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Paul, the Prisoner” in the Winter 2017-2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

## BIBLE SKILL

*Read various passages and summarize.*

Luke made it clear that the jailer’s faith was evidenced by his ministry to and fellowship with Paul and Silas. Read Matthew 7:15-20 and James 2:14-19. How do these passages define the relationship between faith and works? Write a summary statement explaining what these verses teach about faith and works.

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

Some news is just too good to keep to ourselves. As hard as we may try to keep some things a secret, we just can’t help ourselves. A job promotion or new job offer, an engagement, or expecting a child are events we can’t wait to share, especially with the people we love. We want to see their reaction and allow them to share in our joy.

(In PSG, p. 55) **What is the best news you have ever shared with your family? What was their response?**

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We find all kinds of stories in the Bible about families with news to share. God promised Abraham a son in his old age. Sarah laughed at the news and then denied that she laughed. Joseph had a dream about his father and brothers bowing to him, and he could not keep it quiet. Mary received news from an angel about a child she would bring into this world. Her news caused Joseph to rethink their relationship. In Acts, we find a jailer who discovered the truth of the gospel. His family heard the message as well and become followers of Christ.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ACTS 16:16–17:15

Last week we read about the establishment of two mission teams. Paul and Barnabas parted company, and Paul was joined by Silas and Timothy. Paul’s new team embarked on a missionary journey that would lead to the evangelization of Europe. They first went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia. It is clear that the missionary journey was under the direction of the Holy Spirit. For example, we are told that the Holy Spirit prevented from speaking the gospel message in the province of Asia (16:6). While in Troas, Paul had a vision from the Lord that directed him to go to Macedonia (16:7-10).

The team left Troas by ship and spent several days in Philippi, a Roman colony and a leading city of that district of Macedonia (16:11-12). This city received its name from Philip of Macedon, who seized the gold mines and fortified the city. The city, with the rest of Macedonia, came under Roman control in 168 B.C. While Luke mentioned several other cities that were Roman colonies, Philippi is the only one he described as a Roman colony. A Roman colony used Roman law and that may account for Luke’s mention of its status, a detail that would come into play concerning Paul’s imprisonment.

When Paul first visited a city, he typically attended the Jewish synagogue on the first available Sabbath. It does not appear that there were

a sufficient number of Jews in Philippi for there to have been a synagogue, which required ten men. However, there were a number of Jewish women who met outside the city gate by the river for prayer. Paul found out about the meeting and attended so that he could tell them the story of Jesus.

One of the women named Lydia responded to the message and she and her household were baptized. The people of this area were famed for their skill in the manufacture and use of purple dye. Lydia was involved in this industry. After her conversion she invited the missionary team to use her home as their missionary home base. During their stay in Philippi, while they were on their way to prayer, they were followed by a fortune-teller who heralded them as servants of the “Most High God” (16:17). Paul commanded the demonic spirit in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of the woman, and it did so immediately.

The owners of the fortune-teller did not celebrate the delivery of the slave girl from demonic spirits. They were only concerned about their loss of money. They dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates. The only accusation they could bring was the suggestion that these men were causing disturbances and promoting customs illegal for Romans to adopt or practice (16:21). The magistrates would have been most concerned with promoting peace. There were laws that prohibited foreign religious propaganda among Roman citizens, and the crowd was clearly suggesting that Paul and his colleagues were doing so.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### THE SITUATION (ACTS 16:22-24)

#### VERSE 22

The overreaction of the *magistrates* is surprising. New religions were tolerated as long as there was not a moral scandal or a great disturbance. Therefore, we must surmise that the chief magistrates were responding to the desires of the mob. Based on the official apology we find in verses 35-40, we can conclude that there was no attempt to investigate the validity of the charges. The magistrates had the men *stripped* and beaten. It was not permissible for a Roman citizen to be subjected to such punishment, but Paul did not inform them of his citizenship until after they were beaten and imprisoned (16:17).

#### VERSES 23-24

After inflicting many blows on the missionaries, the magistrates had them jailed with the instructions to *guard them carefully*. The jailer took the order seriously. He put them in *the inner prison* and placed their *feet in the stocks*. The stocks had more than two holes for the legs, and thus the legs could be forced wide apart to inflict additional pain. The inner cell and the stocks were designed to ensure the prisoners could not escape.

### ACTS 16:22-24

<sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in the attack against them, and the chief magistrates stripped off their clothes and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had severely flogged them, they threw them in jail, ordering the jailer to guard them carefully.

<sup>24</sup> Receiving such an order, he put them into the inner prison and secured their feet in the stocks.

**As a Roman citizen, Paul was treated unfairly, but he did not complain. Why do you think he did not claim his rights until later?**

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## ACTS 16:25

<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

## ACTS 16:26-28

<sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> But Paul called out in a loud voice, "Don't harm yourself, because we're all here!"

## THE OPPORTUNITY (ACTS 16:25-28)

### VERSE 25

The normal sounds coming from the cells at midnight would have been agonized cries or vile cursing. The missionaries did not bemoan their plight nor complain about the unfair treatment they received. Instead they demonstrated their confidence in God by **praying and singing hymns to God**. Luke's note about the prisoner's **listening** to them is significant. We never know the total impact of our actions or our witness. While we will hear about the conversion of the jailer, it is entirely possible that others witnessed the behavior of the missionaries and heard their words of praise. It seems likely that the influence of these missionaries and their teaching prohibited the other prisoners from escaping when the opportunity presented itself.

**We never know the total impact of our actions or our witness.**

### VERSES 26-28

The **earthquake** was of sufficient magnitude that it opened the prison doors and loosened the chains of all the prisoners. The jailer was awakened by the earthquake, and when he went to investigate he saw what must have been his worst nightmare—the prison **doors were opened**. He immediately assumed that all the prisoners had taken advantage of the impact of the earthquake and had made a hasty departure. The guard was responsible for the prisoners. He knew that his life was at stake if he had to report the loss of the prisoners under his care. The jailer was prepared to take his own life by plunging his short sword into his heart. Paul called to him with a loud voice, "**Don't harm yourself, because we're all here!**" This must have been the most beautiful words he had ever heard. They certainly had a life-altering impact on this Roman jailer.

**How do you respond when you are unfairly treated or ridiculed for your faith? Do you see it as a God-given opportunity to share your testimony? Could this be the reason Paul did not mention his Roman citizenship earlier?**

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## Profile of Silas (In PSG, p. 59)

- *Silas and Silvanus are Greek and Latin forms of the same name.*
- *Leader in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 15:22)*
- *Carried news of Jerusalem conference to the believers at Antioch (Acts 15:22)*
- *Accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:40-41)*
- *Imprisoned with Paul in Philippi (Acts 16:19-24)*
- *Served as Peter's scribe and/or letter carrier (1 Pet. 5:12)*

## THE CONVERSION (ACTS 16:29-32)

### VERSE 29

Calling for lamps or torches, the jailer **rushed in** and **fell down trembling** at the feet of Paul and Silas. The act could have been a gesture of worship. You may recall that the people in Lystra (14:15) wanted to worship Paul and Barnabas when they witnessed the healing of the lame man. In that instance, Paul quickly corrected their mistaking them for gods. In this case it may have been a simple act of profound gratitude. In any case, it was an act showing the Roman jailer's subservience.

### VERSE 30

After the jailer escorted them out of the prison, he asked them, "**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**" Some scholars suggest we need to understand this in the secular sense of how his physical life could be spared. That is highly unlikely since his life had already been spared when the prisoners remained in jail after they had a way of escape. No, we must understand this question in the full spiritual sense of conversion. It is possible that the stories of Lydia's conversion and the fortune teller's deliverance and bold declaration concerning Paul were communicated to the jailer when authorities handed Paul over for incarceration. The miracle of the earthquake and the unprecedented action of prisoners who chose not to flee had certainly gotten the jailer's attention and made him receptive to the gospel.

### VERSE 31

The jailer's question was both sincere and simple and Paul's reply was to the point: "**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.**" The missionaries told him that faith in Jesus was the way of salvation for himself and his entire **household**. This statement in no way implies that the jailer's household would be saved by his decision, as the next verse will make abundantly clear. The biblical witness is clear that each individual make their own decision for Christ.

### ACTS 16:29

<sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.

### ACTS 16:30

<sup>30</sup> He escorted them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

### ACTS 16:31

<sup>31</sup> They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."

## ACTS 16:32

<sup>32</sup> And they spoke the word of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house.

### VERSE 32

Paul's mention of the jailer's household must have prompted the jailer to realize that the message he had just heard was so profound that it must be shared with his entire family. I recall an occasion as a young pastor in rural Kentucky when I began to witness to a man who abruptly stopped me and said that he wanted his family to hear what I had to say. He then proceeded to round up his wife and children. The jailer must have had a similar reaction. We have to fill in a few gaps since Luke did not give us sufficient information to know how they notified the jailer's family. It seems likely that the jailer's residence was near the jail complex. This would explain how he arrived at the jail so quickly after the earthquake and how he was able to minister to them in his own house (see v. 34).

What is clear is that when the family arrived, the missionaries **spoke the word of the Lord to him along with everyone in the house**. Luke makes explicit what is implied in the case of Lydia and her household (v. 15). Each member of the house believed in the Lord Jesus. We can also surmise that Paul would have given greater fullness to what it means to "believe in the Lord Jesus." We should not overlook the jailer's significant role in the conversion of his household. It is clear that he appropriately demonstrated spiritual influence with his family members.

## We should not overlook the jailer's significant role in the conversion of his household.

I have occasionally heard well-meaning Christian parents indicate that they did not require their children to attend church nor did they share Christ with them because they didn't want to pressure their children into a decision. Our children have abundant pressure from the world *not* to decide for Christ. We must tell our family about the One who changed our lives.

(In PSG, p. 61) **What does the presence of the jailer's family reveal about his attitude toward them? How do you see the same attitudes demonstrated today?**

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## ACTS 16:33

<sup>33</sup> He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away he and all his family were baptized.

## THE TRANSFORMATION (ACTS 16:33-34)

### VERSE 33

It is fascinating and instructive to note how quickly the jailer became aware of Paul and Silas's needs once he experienced conversion. When our eyes are opened to Christ, they are quickly opened to see the needs of others. Noticing the suffering of the missionaries, the jailer took them that **same hour** and **washed their wounds**. Their conversion had immediate consequences. Throughout Luke's account in the Book of Acts, he focused on the evidence of conversion whether it is joy, praise, or concrete hospitality.

True conversion leads to ongoing transformation and results in observable demonstrations of faith.

## When our eyes are opened to Christ, they are quickly opened to see the needs of others.

The jailer washed the wounds of the disciples, and then he and his household received an even more significant washing when **he and all his family were baptized**. It is noteworthy that belief precedes baptism and that baptism is the natural consequence of authentic belief. Others witness transformed behavior in both concrete demonstrations of faith and baptism with water; these give testimony to authentic conversion.

### VERSE 34

The jailer now did the unexpected—**he brought them into his house, set a meal before them**, and celebrated his newfound faith. He had no reason to think they might try to escape since they had remained in the prison when the earthquake had provided ample opportunity. The table fellowship indicates that the jailer no longer viewed them as prisoners, but as brothers in Christ. The gospel breaks down barriers such as race, class, or social status.

## The gospel breaks down barriers such as race, class, or social status.

The prisoners must have returned to their cells after their meal in the jailer's home. The magistrates must have known that the charges against Paul and Silas were bogus because they sent the police to tell the jailer to release the prisoners (vv. 35-36). Paul refused to leave until the magistrates personally came to escort him from the prison (v. 37). He made this demand based on his rights as a Roman citizen. When the magistrates heard this news, they came and apologized and urged them to leave town (v. 39). We might wonder why Paul claimed his citizenship rights after he had been jailed and beaten and not before. Perhaps he didn't want a personal apology as much as he wanted to protect the young believers in Philippi from potential persecution after his departure. Having erred once in regard to Paul, the Roman authorities would be less likely to interfere with the believers Paul left behind. Note that before Paul left town, he stopped at Lydia's house to encourage the brothers (v. 40).

**Conversion is the first step in a process of lifelong transformation. If transformation leads to observable demonstrations of faith, how do we explain the lack of ministry by such a large number of people who claim to be Christians?**

### ACTS 16:34

<sup>34</sup> 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.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**CONVEY:** Invite the group to share good news from their week. Talk about how some news is simply too good to keep to oneself and must be shared. Discuss the typical kinds of news that people share with each other.

**PONDER:** Encourage the group to share times when they directly influenced someone for good or bad. Use these discussion starters: a fashion trend you set, a time you got someone else in trouble, or a person you mentored.

**NOTE:** Point out that each of us influence and are influenced by others, so it's critical that we understand the extent and responsibility of our influence.

**TRANSITION:** Note that we exercise perhaps our greatest influence in our families, often without realizing it or trying.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Acts 16:22-24. Create two teams, asking one team to be ready to list the actions that were taken against Paul and Silas, while the second team identifies those responsible.

**CONNECT:** Invite the two teams to write the actors and their actions on the whiteboard.

**TRANSITION:** *Why do you think some people respond so strongly against the gospel message and its messengers?* (PSG, p. 58)

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Acts 16:25-28, while the two teams again listen for actions and actors. Guide them to identify God as the actor who instigated the earthquake.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Draw attention to the ways each of the characters in the story were surprised at this point.

**VOTE:** Lead the group to vote on a scale of one to ten their level of identifying with Paul and Silas, the other prisoners, and the jailer. Discuss what elements most influenced their level of identifying with each character.

**TRANSITION:** *How did Paul and Silas's actions demonstrate their confidence in God? How would you describe their impact on the others in prison?* (PSG, p. 59)

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read Acts 16:29-32, while the two groups outline the actions and the actors in this passage.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Note that Paul intervened when the jailer started to kill himself by reporting that all the prisoners were there.

**QUERY:** *The passage doesn't say explicitly, but why do you think that none of the prisoners took the opportunity to escape?*

**CONTRAST:** Compare the jailer’s initial reaction with the trembling deference he gave Paul and Silas once he discovered that they were still there.

**SHARE:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud the jailer’s question in verse 30. Invite the group to share a time when they asked such a leading, life-changing question.

**ASK:** *Why do you think the jailer wasn’t just relieved that Paul and Silas were there but ready to explore their entire philosophy of life?*

**HIGHLIGHT:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud **Pack Item 12** (*Poster: Acts 16:31*), this session’s memory verse. Point out the simplicity and yet profound depth of Paul and Silas’s response. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*) as needed. Highlight the verse for this session and encourage the group to commit it to memory.

**INFLUENCE:** Note that their message was not confined to the jailer only. Instead, Paul and Silas suggested that salvation could belong to the jailer’s family, too.

**TRANSITION:** *What does the presence of the jailer’s family reveal about his attitude toward them? How do you see the same attitudes demonstrated today?* (PSG, p. 61)

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Acts 16:33-34. Lead the group to identify the actor in the passage and call out the words that demonstrated his actions.

**REFLECT:** Discuss whether the jailer’s actions may have put him at risk and potential motivations for him. Lead the group to reflect on how often they allow joy in Jesus to be their guide.

**CLARIFY:** Note that the missionaries were returned to jail. Call on a volunteer to read verse 36 for context. To illustrate why this was the correct way to proceed, call on a volunteer to read verses 38-40.

**TRANSITION:** *What things did God accomplish through Paul and Silas’s imprisonment? How does that impact the way you react to tough times in your own life?* (PSG, p. 62)

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**DRAW:** Erase the whiteboard and write “Paul and Silas” with one arrow down to “Prisoners” and another arrow down to “Jailer.” Draw an arrow from “Jailer” to “Family.” Draw several arrows from “Family” to question marks to suggest that our influence may never end.

**RESPOND:** Call attention to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 63): *Memorize Acts 16:31. With whom in your family can you share this verse in the next seven days? Record how you plan on sharing this verse with them.* Afterward, encourage the group to break into pairs to recite Acts 16:31 together and share with the other person to whom they plan to tell the verse that week.

**PRAY:** Ask for God to provide opportunities to share Christ at home and with family. Pray for the boldness and spirit of Paul and Silas, whose faith and trust in God became transformational in others’ lives.



## PRACTICE

- Text the group early in the week with a reminder of their commitment.
- During the week, follow through on your commitment to share Christ with a family member or someone else who is lost. Remind the group to pray for one another.
- At the end of the week, share the results of your encounter, whether it was immediately fruitful or not. Exhibit faith that all witness bears fruit.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an option for illustrating the importance of influence in faith-sharing, make the meeting room as dark as possible by covering any existing windows and turning off lights. Begin the session by lighting a single, small candle or flashlight. Share your favorite Bible verse, adding a second light. Invite others to share, instructing them to add a light as well. After most have shared, emphasize the impact of each light individually and collectively.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- When making the list of Actors and Actions, as each action is identified, propose how that action impacted the influence of the gospel. Decide how each turn of events may have affected faith and joy in Christ by taking a vote on each actions' impact—one light for some impact, two lights for helping the gospel spread, and three lights for the action having a greatly-multiplied affect. Allow the group to decide the level of impact.
- As you read Acts 16:29-32 where the jailer asks what he must do to be saved, hold your candle high. Point out the symbolism of Paul and Silas's bold response.
- To support Acts 16:33-34 and the discussion of faith and works, complete the Bible Skill activity in the PSG (p. 62).

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

If you are nearing the end of the session and someone's candle remains unlit, include them by breaking into pairs to recite Acts 16:31. Afterward, talk about the physical and mental effort of believers to remain a bright light in a dark world. Challenge the group to think of the candle as their joy in Christ and consider how they can share this light with others during the week.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play the song "Set My Soul Afire," by Gene Bartlett, and invite the group to sing together. Reflect on the simplicity and yet depth of the song's message.

# THE UNKNOWN KNOWN

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

## ACTS 17:22-34

### MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 17:30

- **READ** Acts 17:16–18:23, First Thoughts (p. 74), and Understand the Context (p. 74).
- **STUDY** Acts 17:22-34, using Explore the Text (pp. 75–79). As you study, follow the directions in the PSG, page 65: *As you read Paul's sermon in Acts 17:22-31, identify his main points. How does each point build to the next point to get to his conclusion (vv. 30-31)?* For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 80–81) and More Ideas (p. 82), in *QuickSource*, and online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras). Focus on ways to lead group members to celebrate and worship by brainstorming creative ways to use the Suggested Music Idea (p. 82).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides; and  Several Bible translations. Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*); and  **PACK ITEM 7** (*Poster: Key Cities in Paul's Journeys*). For More Ideas:  Create a placard for "an Unknown God"; and  Write each Scripture reference on separate pieces of paper to distribute to individuals in the group. You also will need to locate the lyrics to the hymn "Knowing You" to read and/or sing with the group.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Repentance*

Repentance is a genuine turning from sin toward God.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Paul and the Athenians” available in the Winter 2017-2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

## BIBLE SKILL

*Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a doctrine.*

The term “general” or “natural” revelation is used to refer to God’s revelation of Himself in ways other than through His written Word. Compare Acts 17:22-29; Acts 14:16-17; and Romans 1:18-23. What can we learn from these passages about God’s general revelation?

# FIRST THOUGHTS

An unanswered question forces us to search. We may turn to the Internet, call a friend, or buy books on the subject with the hope of finding the answer. We are wired with a desire to know, to understand, to figure it out. We seek to know what is unknown.

(In PSG, p. 64) **What kind of questions do people face that cause them to search for answers? What sources might someone consult to find answers to these questions?**

When Paul visited Athens, he was troubled by the number of idols he saw. At one point he noticed an altar that was inscribed “to an Unknown God” (Acts 17:23). The people of Athens were known for their philosophical curiosity. Therefore, Paul made them an offer they simply couldn’t refuse. He acknowledged that the multiplicity of idols indicated religious curiosity. He then declared that he was able to make known to them the identity of the god they worshiped in ignorance. Simply stated—he would make the unknown known.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ACTS 17:16–18:23

After leaving Philippi (Acts 16:40), Paul went to Thessalonica, where he had a brief but successful ministry. The Jews became jealous and attempted to bring the missionaries before the public officials. I love their accusation: “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here too” (17:6). Some of the brethren had hidden Paul and Silas, and later that night sent them off to Berea, where Paul’s message was received with enthusiasm. The Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea and created such a furor that Paul was sent on to Athens. When Paul’s escorts left him in Athens, he gave them instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible (17:1-15).

Athens represented the highest level of culture in classical antiquity and boasted many beautiful sculptures. This was not a planned missionary stop, but Paul, always the missionary, was not a vacationing tourist. On his walk through the city he saw many beautiful sculptures, but to Paul they were simply pagan idols. Seeing the idols, his spirit was troubled over the spiritual condition of the inhabitants of this major city. Paul went to the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews and witnessed daily in the marketplace (17:16-17).

The inhabitants of Athens enjoyed moral and philosophical discussions in the marketplace, and thus Paul had a ready audience. Athens was

the home city of Socrates and Plato and the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno. As Paul witnessed in the marketplace, some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers took him to task. The Epicurean school viewed pleasure as the chief end of life. The highest form of pleasure was a tranquil life free from pain, passion, and superstitious fears. They did not deny the existence of the gods, but viewed them as having no interest in the lives of men. The Stoics, who claimed Zeno as their founder, desired to live consistently with nature and focused on the rational faculty of mankind. They believed in individual self-sufficiency and were essentially pantheists. Their god was the World-soul.

Most of these rival philosophers saw Paul as a “pseudo-intellectual” (17:18), but some were intrigued by Paul’s teaching, thinking that he was teaching foreign deities. Paul was simply preaching Jesus and the resurrection. They obviously misunderstood the Greek word for resurrection (*anastasis*) and thought Paul was talking about two foreign deities—Jesus and Anastasis. They took Paul to the Areopagus, which in Paul’s time still retained authority in matters of religion and morals. Paul was given an opportunity to give a further account of his teaching. Luke provides a glimpse into the philosophical curiosity of Athenians—“Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new” (17:21).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### UNKNOWN GOD (ACTS 17:22-23)

#### VERSES 22-23

These two verses introduce the main theme of this section—the ignorance of pagan worship. Commentators are divided over whether we should take verse 22 as Paul’s affirmation of their **religious** interest or whether he was simply stating that they were a superstitious people. If his statement is to be taken as a word of affirmation, then Paul would be using the observation that they are a religious people as a means of obtaining a hearing with his audience so that he could declare the gospel. Other commentators think Paul was expressing his disdain for the number of idols he observed in the city. His statement may have been intentionally ambiguous to arouse his audience’s interest.

Paul recounted his trip through the city where he observed the objects of their worship. Notice that Paul referred to their **objects** of worship. In other words, he spoke of *what* they worshiped and not *who* they worshiped. Along with the many idols that depicted various Greek gods he encountered an altar inscribed **To an Unknown God**. They wanted to make sure they had all their bases covered. The existence of this altar provided Paul with a vital point of contact from which he could proceed to declare the gospel.

Paul’s point was powerful and pointed—to worship an unknown god is to admit one’s spiritual ignorance. The emphasis on **ignorance** may take

### ACTS 17:22-23

<sup>22</sup> Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. <sup>23</sup> 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.

into account that for Greeks in general and Stoics in particular, ignorance was a cardinal sin.

## ACTS 17:24

<sup>24</sup> 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 address at Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:16-41 is a sample of one of Paul’s proclamations to a Jewish audience. The message beginning in 17:22-23 is a sample of one of his messages to a pagan audience. What differences can you see in the introduction? What implications does that have for us as we share the gospel today?**

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## ACTS 17:25

<sup>25</sup> Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.

## THE KNOWN CREATOR (ACTS 17:24-29)

### VERSE 24

It is instructive that Paul begins with God as Creator. Even though he spoke to a pagan audience, his description of God was fully consistent with that of the Old Testament. He is **the God who made the world** (*cosmos*) **and everything in it**. The term *cosmos* was familiar to every Greek. For the Greeks, divinity was to be found in the heavens and in humanity. The biblical view is that God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them and for that reason He is **Lord of heaven and earth**. Two logical conclusions flow from the truth that He is Creator—He **does not live in shrines made by hands** nor does he need anything from man (v. 25). Paul’s first assertion is similar to Solomon’s recognition as he prepared to dedicate the temple: “But will God indeed live on earth? Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain you, much less this temple I have built” (1 Kings 8:27).

## ACTS 17:26-27

<sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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

### VERSE 25

The reference to **human hands** may be a reference to the idols pagans created by human hands and then worshipped. The primary point is that God is self-sufficient and does not need anything from His creatures to fulfill Himself. Greeks would have agreed with Paul’s description of God to a point. They would have seen divinity as totally self-sufficient and would have agreed that a divine being was the giver of life and breath. But their pantheistic view of God was totally different from Paul’s monotheistic view. Pantheism means “all is God.” Pantheism believes that the world depends on God but does not believe the world’s existence to be separate from God’s existence. Paul’s declaration was that God is the Creator who stands above His creation and gives it life and meaning. This makes every creature dependent on and accountable to the one true God. Rather than God depending on His creatures to serve Him; He provides all their needs.

### VERSES 26-27

These two verses are one long sentence in Greek and establish the heart of Paul’s message. God made humanity dependent on Him so that they might **seek** Him. The reference to **one man** is likely a reference to Adam. Although there

are many nations, they are one in their common ancestry and thus are equally accountable to their one Creator. This declaration has many implications. First, the God Paul spoke of is no Jewish cult God. Further, no one people can claim racial superiority. The Greeks believed they were superior to all barbarians.

There is some question as to how we should understand the phrase **appointed times and the boundaries of where they live**. *Times* could be understood as a reference to the appointed seasons of the year by which God supplies the physical needs of man with food, or it could refer to historical epochs, the rise and fall of nations. One interpretation focuses on God's sovereignty over creation, the other on God's sovereignty over the nations.

Both points are clearly true and once again the ambiguity may have been purposeful to emphasize God's total care of man, which is intended to cause all mankind to seek Him. **They** in verse 27 refers to **every nationality** in verse 26. God's care is all-inclusive and His desire is that all mankind might seek and find Him. Stoics believed that through reason one could come to a knowledge of the divine. Paul heartily disagreed. Any understanding of God through nature would still rely upon revelation and not human reason. Paul used the Greek optative mood of the verb which expresses doubt, as we can detect in most English translations—**perhaps they might reach out and find him**. The issue is neither God's purpose nor His providential care; the issue is fallen man's ability to respond to God.

#### VERSE 28

In an attempt to further connect with his audience, Paul quoted from a pagan poet. You might wonder why Paul didn't quote the Old Testament, as we have seen him do in early messages we have studied. Paul knew that Scripture would have been meaningless to the Athenians at this point. Once again Paul found common ground without compromising the gospel.

Some see the phrase **in him we live and move and have our being** as a quote from a poet while others see it as a traditional Greek triadic formula. In either case, Paul did not mean this in the pantheistic sense that would be embraced by his audience. His view was clearly stated in verse 25. God gives life and breath to all people and in that sense Paul could affirm this familiar statement.

The second statement, **for we are also his offspring**, is generally regarded as a quote from the Stoic poet Aratus. For Aratus, this phrase would have meant that humanity shared in the divine nature of Zeus. Paul accepted the limited truth that the pagan poet had observed, but immediately provided further information based on God's full revelation.

#### VERSE 29

Beginning with the truth of the poet's statement, Paul drew out the logical conclusion based on the absolute truth of God's Word. **Since we are God's offspring**, the work of His hands, then it stands to reason that no idol crafted by human hands is sufficient to represent divine nature. If humans are like God, then God is not like any idol made of **gold or silver or stone**. Paul's argument was similar to those made throughout the Old Testament concerning idol worship (see Isa. 44:9).

#### ACTS 17:28

<sup>28</sup> 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.'

#### ACTS 17:29

<sup>29</sup> 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.

Human beings truly are God's offspring—not in the pantheistic sense intended by Stoic poets but in the biblical sense of being created by Him in His image. This is a much richer and profound understanding. Since humanity is the offspring of God, they must give Him the honor and worship due Him.

**What evidence can we give today that God continues to make Himself known so all men can know and worship Him? How can we use this evidence as we witness to friends?**

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### ACTS 17:30

<sup>30</sup> Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent,

### ACTS 17:31

<sup>31</sup> 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."

## JUDGMENT BY THE SON (ACTS 17:30-31)

### VERSE 30

Paul now returned to the theme of ignorance with which he began his message (see v. 23). The Athenians were guilty of ignorance evidenced by their worship of idols which represented false gods. God, in His patience, had **overlooked the times of ignorance**. We find a similar idea in Romans 3:25 where Paul spoke of God exercising restraint as He "passed over the sins previously committed." Paul declared in his speech at Lystra, "in past generations he allowed all the nations to go their own way" (Acts 14:16). None of these passages suggest that someone who is ignorant of God would not be accountable to God. In Romans 1:20 Paul declared that God's revelation is sufficient, and therefore all people "are without excuse." What Paul conveyed is that, with the coming of Christ, there is a fresh start and the time of God's forbearance has ended because people's ignorance has ended. God has fully revealed Himself in Christ. For the Athenians, God was no longer an unknown God, and thus if they continued in their false worship they would be without excuse.

In the context of the full revelation available through Christ, **God now commands all people everywhere to repent**. True repentance for the Athenians would require that they turn from their ignorance and idolatry and submit to the true knowledge of God made clear in the coming of Christ.

### VERSE 31

The Creator of all is the judge of all. Since God has designed the world to make people seek Him and since He has sent Christ to fully reveal Him, all people will one day stand before Him, as He will **judge the world in righteousness**. Since He is Creator of all humanity, all will stand before Him. Since God is a righteous God, His judgment will be fully just. People will be held accountable for their relationship to Him.

God has set a day and appointed **the man** who will be the righteous judge. That man is Jesus, who as Son of man will carry out His role as Judge (see Dan. 7:13). God has furnished incontrovertible proof concerning Jesus' qualification to be both Savior and Judge **by raising him from the dead**. While it is beyond our limited knowledge to know how God will judge

those who have limited revelation, we can be assured that it will be a just judgment because He is a righteous judge.

**Does the concept of God’s judgment sometimes frighten you? How does an understanding of His righteous character help us face judgment?**

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## **SPLIT DECISION (ACTS 17:32-34)**

### **VERSES 32-33**

The Epicureans believed that human existence ceased at death. The Stoics believed that only the immaterial spirit survived death. Thus, for all Greeks the idea of a bodily resurrection made no sense. There were some in the audience who ***began to ridicule*** Paul when he spoke of Jesus’ ***resurrection of the dead***. However, there were others whose interest was piqued and they indicated a desire to hear more about what Paul taught. Paul left the council meeting and soon thereafter left Athens.

### **VERSE 34**

I love little linking words like ***however***. Here is the good news—***some people joined him and believed***. One of the believers was ***a woman named Damaris***. It is interesting that Luke mentioned two of the converts by name, one a man, ***Dionysius***, and the other a woman. He was demonstrating the universality of the gospel as it impacted the lives of Jew and Greek, male and female. Luke noted, without further details, that there were ***others*** who joined the two converts that Luke mentioned by name.

Some commentators argue that Paul’s preaching was a capitulation to the intellectuals and a failure. Not so! While he did build bridges to the Greek audience by referring to their religious curiosity, quoting one of their poets, and using language that effectively communicated, he was faithful to the gospel. Further, he sowed the seed of the gospel and some people were saved.

**Do you ever allow the apparent lack of results to discourage you in your witnessing? What can we learn from this passage concerning faithfulness?**

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### **ACTS 17:32-33**

<sup>32</sup> 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.” <sup>33</sup> So Paul left their presence.

### **ACTS 17:34**

<sup>34</sup> However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**LIST:** Launch the session by inviting the group to respond to the question found under the first paragraph in the PSG, page 64: *What kind of questions do people face that cause them to search for answers? What sources might someone consult to find answers to these questions?*

**DESCRIBE:** Identify questions that the group has searched for answers to and the sources they referenced: the Internet, experts, friends, mentors, and so forth. For example, a search for a challenging medical diagnosis may have revealed an important truth.

**TRANSITION:** Point out that in today's study, Paul encountered people who were honestly searching but somehow still missing the point.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Acts 17:22-23, and lead the group to underline in their PSG the words or phrases that stand out to them.

**DIRECT:** Point out Athens, where Paul spoke to the Areopagus, on **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*).

**MINI-LECTURE:** Use background material from Understand the Context (PSG, p. 65) and **Pack Item 7** (*Poster: Key Cities in Paul's Journeys*) to give the group insight into the philosophical leanings of the Athenians and a description of the Areopagus.

**DISCUSS:** Highlight the building of an altar "to an Unknown God" and, as a group, decide whether our culture has the same kind of God-consciousness.

**HIGHLIGHT:** *Paul showed quick thinking, agility, and wisdom in seizing this opportunity to share Christ.* Invite the group to discuss the barriers they may have felt in a similar situation.

**ASK:** *What can we do to develop the kind of mind-set that led Paul to seize this unique opportunity?*

**TRANSITION:** *What misconceptions do people have about life and deities? How could those misconceptions be used to initiate a conversation about the gospel?* (PSG, p. 67)

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read aloud Acts 17:24-29, while the group underlines in their PSG (p. 67) the claims that Paul made about God.

**REVEAL:** Note that according to verse 27, God engineered the world and human hearts to seek Him. Ask: *How is Jesus the perfect revelation of God? Humanity?*

**RECITE:** Point to verse 28 and the poetic references to God. Call on the volunteers to read the verse in various Bible translations to gain insight into the words used.

**ASK:** *What misconceptions about God does Paul address in this passage? How are those same misconceptions expressed today?* (PSG, p. 69)

**EXPLORE:** Use the Bible Skill exercise (PSG, p. 69) to discover some ways God reveals Himself.

**TRANSITION:** Note the use of the phrase art and humanity. Invite the group to rate the human imagination compared to God's.

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud Acts 17:30-31, while rest of the group underlines the key words in the passage (PSG, p. 70).

**REFER:** Draw attention to *ignorance* as a key word in verse 30. Note: *Now that Paul had declared God to the Athenians, they were no longer ignorant but in need of repentance.*

**DEFINE:** Direct the group to read the definition of *repentance* from their PSG (p. 70). Discuss the twofold action involved in repentance.

**CONNECT:** *After declaring to them the one true God, Paul extended a direct invitation to receive Christ, the very reason why he launched into a discussion of the unknown god.* Point to the urgency of Paul's message and the Athenians' response.

**CONSIDER:** Emphasize Paul's proof of Jesus' divinity as seen in His resurrection. Encourage the group to propose why that remains important to reference.

**TRANSITION:** *In what ways is God's requirement for repentance fair to everyone? How does Jesus' being raised from the dead qualify Him to judge everyone?* (PSG, p. 70)

**STUDY:** Call on a volunteer to read Acts 17:32-34. Lead the group to circle in the PSG the reaction that most resembled their own when they first heard the claim of Jesus' resurrection. Invite volunteers to share, identifying themselves as a skeptic, interested, or receptive.

**TRANSITION:** *Identify the different responses of the people who heard Paul in Athens. What other ways might a person respond to hearing the gospel for the first time?* (PSG, p. 71)

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**REVIEW:** Re-enumerate the claims that Paul made in relation to God. Invite the group to determine from their own experiences which claim had the most impact or meaning to them as they made a decision for Christ.

**APPLY:** Encourage the group to think of ways that parts of our culture mimic the Athenians in their desire to entertain new ideas, trends, and ways of thinking. Point out ways that people may be religious without being Christian. In addition to the other major religions of the world that people subscribe to, point to nature worship, humanism, materialism, pluralism, and so forth.

**DISCUSS:** Call attention to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 72): *Who do you know that is religious but not a follower of Christ? Identify insights from today's study that could be used to share the gospel with that person. How can you do this in a loving way?*

**PINPOINT:** Encourage the group to think of and record in the margin of their PSG the name of an unbeliever who has an attitude akin to the Athenians: seeking but not necessarily understanding.

**PRAY:** Ask God to provide opportunities, right down to opening lines, for the members of the group to get into conversation with these unbelievers.



## PRACTICE

- Text each group member individually sometime during the week and let them know that you are praying for their skeptical friend and an opportunity to share Christ.
- Send a group message and ask for ideas for beginning a conversation with another person who is a skeptic.
- Set up a time to meet with a skeptic sometime during the week. Whether the encounter was negative or positive, report back to the group.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an option, set up an “altar” with an end table and placard “to an Unknown God.” Invite the group to determine the unknown gods that people entertain or speculate about today. Transition by telling the group that the Athenians were interested in knowledge, philosophy, and new ideas. Note that the session will be fashioned as an intellectual exploration of ideas as revealed in Scripture.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- As you read the Acts 17:24-29, refer to supplementary Scripture: To focus on the problem of spiritual ignorance (v. 23), read Hosea 4:6. As you focus on creation (v. 24), read Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 96:5; Jeremiah 10:11; and Colossians 1:16. To emphasize that God does not need humanity but we need Him (v. 25), read Job 22:2-4. For more understanding of God’s sovereignty over the nations (v. 26), read Genesis 11:1-9. To realize that God instilled in us a need for Him (v. 27), read Psalm 63:1 and Isaiah 26:9. To draw attention to the Giver of life, read Job 33:4 and John 1:3-4. To contrast God with man-made creations (v. 29), read Psalm 97:7 and Isaiah 44:8-11.
- As you explore Acts 17:30-31, refer also to Psalm 51:4; Matthew 4:16-17; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 9:27; and Revelation 3:3 for a full description of repentance.
- As you explore Acts 17:32-34, refer to Thomas, who doubted, and read John 20:29 and Hebrews 11.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Recap the session by pointing out that Paul’s message, although new to the Athenians, is confirmed and repeated throughout the Scriptures. Remind the group that the pursuit of understanding should not be just an intellectual pursuit; there is more understanding that comes from active faith.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Read the lyrics to the hymn “Knowing You,” by Graham Kendrick, to relate to the Athenians’ experience. Play the song and sing together.

# VALUE ALL

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

## ACTS 16:16-19; PSALM 139:13-16

### MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 139:14

- **READ** Acts 16:16-19; Psalm 139, First Thoughts (p. 84), and Understand the Context (pp. 84–85). Contrast the value of life represented by the owners of the young girl in Acts and by the psalmist.
- **STUDY** Acts 16:16-19; Psalm 139:13-16, using Explore the Text (pp. 85–89). As you study reflect on the value of all lives as described by the psalmist and consider rationalizations often offered to devalue other people. For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 90–91), More Ideas (p. 92), and ideas in *QuickSource* to develop a plan to address the needs of your group. Other ideas to customize your session may be found online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras). Consider inviting a person working in a crisis pregnancy center, in elder care, with a rescue mission, or with a challenged population to speak briefly during the group time.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog ([LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry](http://LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides;  A small, handheld mirror; and  Pictures of people that evoke emotional responses. Prepare to display the following Pack Item:  **PACK ITEM 13** (*Poster: Psalm 139:14*).



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *The Christian and the Social Order*

In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “First-Century Slavery” an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article available digitally in the Winter 2017-2018 *Biblical Illustrator* for Explore the Bible at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator)

## BIBLE SKILL

*Read, reflect on, and react emotionally to a Bible verse.*

Read Psalm 139:13-16 aloud several times. Emphasize the pronouns used for God in the passage. Then read it aloud emphasizing the pronouns the writer used of himself (I, me, my, etc.) How does each verse move you emotionally? What feelings were evoked by emphasizing the pronouns the writer used for God and then the pronouns the writer used for himself?

# FIRST THOUGHTS

Our lives are bombarded with images of people. Every day celebrities and people we have never met flash across our social media feeds and the news. Some images cause us to take a second look. Some move us to empathy. Some images we just pass over without trying to understand the significance of the image or the person.

(In PSG, p. 73) **What do our responses to an image of a person reveal about who we value and why?**

Life is precious because it is a gift from God who alone is the source of life. God created humankind in His own image, which means we are relational, rational, and responsible. God created us to have an eternal relationship with Him. Human life is of such infinite value that God sent His only begotten Son to redeem fallen humanity. If God values each life, how can we do less?

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ACTS 16:16-19; PSALM 139:13-16

This lesson brings together passages from Acts and Psalms. Our passage from Acts takes us back to Philippi. You may recall from session six that there were not enough Jewish men to establish a synagogue in Philippi (ten were required). However, some Jewish women met outside the city gate by the river for worship. Lydia came to Christ through Paul’s teaching. After Lydia’s conversion, Paul continued to go to this place of prayer. A slave girl with a spirit of divination, who made a handsome profit for her owners, began regularly following the missionaries and shouting out, “These men, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God” (Acts 16:17). Paul cast the spirit out of her, causing her owners much grief because their hope of profit from her was gone.

Our second passage is one of the great psalms of David. This psalm overwhelms us as we see the greatness of God and His incredible desire to relate to us intimately. The thought of the early section of this psalm moves from being seen by God (vv. 1-6), to being pursued by God (vv. 7-12), to being fashioned by God (vv. 13-16). We will pay close attention to the section that focuses on God’s intimate knowledge of all mankind. His knowledge and care for us began while we were in our mother’s wombs. This truth is too wonderful for David to comprehend (vv. 17-18). The psalm ends with David’s desire for an intimate relationship that will lead to everlasting life.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## FREEDOM GAINED (ACTS 16:16-18)

A demon-controlled slave girl, who practiced fortune telling for the financial benefit of her owners, followed Paul and Silas. She continually declared them to be servants of God who were sharing His message of salvation. After many days of this activity, Paul freed the girl by casting out the demon.

### VERSE 16

Since there was no synagogue in Philippi, Paul sought out the place where Jews and God-fearers (Gentiles who had been attracted to the monotheism and moral values of Judaism) met for prayer. The missionaries had made it their practice to make repeated visits to this place. On one occasion, when the missionaries were headed to the place of prayer, they were met by **a slave girl ... who had a spirit by which she predicted the future.** The Greek speaks of a “python” spirit. The python snake was the symbol of the Pythian god, Apollo, who was believed to predict future events. The most famous of these fortune tellers was the Delphic oracle.

Anyone believed to be a fortune-teller was in great demand. Both the Greeks and the Romans put great stock in foretelling. Before they went to battle or made important decisions they would consult someone who could forecast the future. For this reason, the young slave was a gold mine for her owners.

### VERSE 17

The first meeting was not the last. According to verse 18 she followed the missionaries “for many days.” She seemed drawn to these men who were filled with the Spirit of God. As she followed the missionaries, she cried out, **“These men, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God.”**

Like the demonic spirits who recognized Jesus during His earthly ministry, this fortune-teller was able to see into the true nature of Paul’s preaching. In Mark 1:24 we find the story of a man with an unclean spirit who heard Jesus preach in the synagogue. He cried out identifying Jesus the Nazarene as “the Holy One of God!”

*Most High God* was a common Old Testament name for Yahweh, the One True God. It is clearly reflected when God is referred to as El Elyon. But “God Most High” was also applied to Zeus in the Gentile world. Further, the slave girl indicates that they were proclaiming *the way of salvation*. It is unlikely that this statement would have been entirely clear to Gentiles. The emperor claimed to be a “savior” of the people. Thus for people of the Hellenistic world, this claim would likely have meant a way to escape from the powers controlling the destinies of men.

### VERSE 18

After the slave girl had made this declaration for many days, Paul became greatly aggravated. Paul’s aggravation was probably related to the confusion

## ACTS 16:16

<sup>16</sup> 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.

## ACTS 16:17

<sup>17</sup> 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.”

## ACTS 16:18

<sup>18</sup> 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.

her proclamation could be causing since the pagan hearers would have interpreted her declaration based on their polytheistic and superstitious background. Paul didn't want his listeners to see Jesus as just one among many "saviors" in the Greek pantheon of gods. For the sake of the clarity of the gospel, Paul needed to act.

In a manner reminiscent of Jesus' exorcism of demonic spirits, Paul commanded the spirit to come out of her. Paul commanded the demonic spirit in the name of Jesus Christ. To see the similarity look back at the passage referenced above from Mark's Gospel. When the demonic spirit identified Jesus and asked if He had come to destroy them, Jesus rebuked him and said, "Be silent, and come out of him!" (Mark 1:25). In both stories, the demonic spirit obeyed immediately, demonstrating Jesus' authority over every spirit. In Ephesians, Paul declared that Jesus has been seated at the right hand of God, "far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph. 1:21). Jesus' absolute authority over every spirit gave Paul confidence to free this slave girl by casting out the demonic power that ruled her life.

(In PSG, p. 77) **How would you describe the difference between Paul's view of the slave girl and the owners' views of her? How would you define the motives of each in how they related to her?**

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**How does the situation that the slave girl faced compare to human trafficking? What can we do to deliver those who have been enslaved by human traffickers?**

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## ACTS 16:19

<sup>19</sup> 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 COMPLAINT (ACTS 16:19)

### VERSE 19

The slave girl's owners' reaction is predictable but sad. We might have hoped that they would have rejoiced that their slave had been freed from demonic possession. The owners of the fortune teller were incensed because their prospect for financial prosperity had just vanished. It is possible that Luke may have intended a subtle and humorous play on words in this section. He actually uses the same Greek word to describe the demon's exit (v. 18) and the exit of the money. The demon was gone and the profit was gone! Healing a possessed girl was one thing, but causing substantial economic loss was a serious issue.

This scene reminds us of the healing of the Gadarene demoniac (Mark 5:1-17). When Jesus entered the region of the Gerasenes, He was

met by a man with an unclean spirit. This man was so violent that he was shackled among the tombs. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he identified Jesus as “Son of the Most High God” (5:7). Evil spirits always recognize Jesus and His authority. With a simple word of command, Jesus cast out the legion of spirits and sent them into a herd of swine who rushed down the slope to their own demise. When the townspeople heard of the incident, they came out and saw the demon-possessed man clothed and in his right mind. Notice their response: “Then they began to beg him to leave their region” (5:17). The grief over their financial loss outweighed joy over the healing of the demoniac. Their greed is even more reprehensible when we take into account that Jews had no business raising swine.

(In PSG, p. 78) **How might someone try to justify the response of the owners? How do people use the same justification today for devaluing human life?**

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### **VALUED BY GOD** (PSALM 139:13-16)

The psalmist celebrated the wonder of humanity, emphasizing God’s complete involvement in the creation of every person. God’s intentional design and creation of every person gives every individual worth and value at the moment of conception.

**God’s intentional design of every person gives each individual worth and value at the moment of conception.**

#### **VERSE 13**

After focusing on God’s omnipresence and ongoing pursuit of people (Ps. 139:7-12), the psalmist turned his attention to God’s careful and intentional design of each individual in the womb. This third stanza of this psalm carries forward the thought of the first two. God not only knows our thoughts and intentions (vv. 1-6) and is present everywhere with us (vv. 7-12), He is also active in the womb knitting together our inward parts.

The word translated **created** or “formed” is often used to describe divine creative activity. God’s creative work did not cease when He finished fashioning the earth and all that is in it. His creative activity continues unabated in the mother’s womb. The phrase **inward parts** is literally “the kidneys,” but it is used figuratively here to refer to the seat of desires and longings. It refers to the most hidden and vital part of a person. God is active in the womb, knitting together each child.

The psalmist was not the only person in Scripture to speak of God’s creative activity in the womb. Job, when discussing his plight with

#### **PSALM 139:13**

<sup>13</sup> For it was you who created my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

God, declared, “Your hands shaped me and formed me” (Job 10:8). He again noted that God formed him as a potter forms the clay (10:9). Becoming even more specific he noted, “You clothed me with skin and flesh, and wove me together with bones and tendons. You gave me life and faithful love, and your care has guarded my life” (10:11-12). God works in the womb like a potter and a weaver, giving life. Jeremiah, one of the great prophets, declared that God both formed him in the womb and set him apart as a prophet to the nations (Jer. 1:5). God not only designs each person, He does so with kingdom intentionality. One must wonder what potential kingdom impact has been discarded with the countless abortions of people whom God designed to advance His kingdom.

## God not only designs each person, He does so with kingdom intentionality.

### PSALM 139:14

<sup>14</sup> I will praise you because I have been remarkably and wondrously made. Your works are wondrous, and I know this very well.

#### VERSE 14

The most appropriate response to such wonderful truth is *praise*, which immediately came to the lips and pen of the psalmist. His praise prompted him to contemplate the wonderful complexity of his body. Today we can look at anatomical pictures of the human body with its complex skeletal system, veins, arteries, and nerve networks and truly comprehend the amazing and wonderful complexity of the human body. While the psalmist did not have the advantage of anatomical drawings and models, he was well aware of the remarkable design and complexity of his own body. We can agree, *I have been remarkably and wondrously made.*

The last phrase of this verse is rendered differently in various translations. Some translate it so that the emphasis is on God’s knowing us well, which is certainly true. However, the more likely translation is the one chosen by the Christian Standard Bible, which places the on our understanding of the wonder of God’s work. Knowing of God’s care in the womb, the psalmist could be confident of His care for him in all areas of life.

## Knowing of God’s care in the womb, the psalmist could be confident of His care for him in all areas of life.

### PSALM 139:15

<sup>15</sup> My bones were not hidden from you when I was made in secret, when I was formed in the depths of the earth.

#### VERSE 15

The bones which form the skeletal framework of the body were *not hidden* from God since He designed the body and knit it together in the womb. The two phrases, *when I was made in secret* and *when I was formed in the depths of the earth* refer to God’s creative work in the secret place of the mother’s womb. The word translated *formed* may also be translated as “skillfully wrought.” Commentators suggest that the image is that of a needleworker embroidering with great skill to create an intricate, beautiful pattern. We can think of the beautiful and functional network of veins, sinews, muscles, and nerves that make up the human body.

**VERSE 16**

Emphasizing God’s omniscience, the psalmist looked even further back in time and affirmed that God saw him when he *was formless*. Today we would refer to this as the embryonic stage. Once again we might think of potters who intimately know their clay before they begin to fashion it into vessels of their own choosing. It is not possible to conceive of a stronger affirmation of the sanctity and dignity of the unborn child that is stated by this verse and its context. This is a powerful reminder of the value God sets on each of us, even in the embryonic stage.

There is some debate whether the last half of this verse refers to the days of our lives or to the embryonic formation of our bodies. If it is a reference to the embryonic stage, it would mean that the development of the many stages of the embryo (day by day) God planned and knew. If the last half of this verse is a reference to the days of our lives, it focuses on God’s providential care from the womb to the tomb. God has a purpose and plan for each individual and has established good works for us to accomplish (see Eph. 2:8-9). Once again, both ideas are true, and the psalm’s context expresses both.

The truths that God has revealed to the psalmist are so wonderful that he can only declare: “God, how precious your thoughts are to me; how vast their sum is!” (v. 17). We can only respond—Amen!

(In PSG, p. 80) **How do the words of the psalmist relate to the slave girl freed from the demon by Paul? How does our understanding of both passages impact our treatment of all people from conception to death?**

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**How does it make you feel that God has uniquely designed each of us from the moment of conception? How does this impact our understanding of the value of life from conception to death? What are the implications?**

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**PSALM 139:16**

<sup>16</sup> 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.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**GUIDE:** Display the opening sentence from the first paragraph in the PSG (p. 73) somewhere prominent in the room: *Our lives are bombarded with images of people.* Call attention to the statement while passing around a handheld mirror. Direct the group to think about on their own image reflected in the mirror each day, as well as images of people they encounter. Say: *Consider how we respond to varying images. Are certain images more difficult to accept than others? Why or why not?*

**DISCUSS:** *What do our responses to an image of a person reveal about who we value and why? (PSG, p. 73) Are there certain groups or individuals that seem harder to value than others? Why or why not?*

**TRANSITION:** *As we focus on the value of human life, we will examine passages from the Old and New Testaments. First, we will examine Acts 16:16-19 and then Psalm 139:13-16. Both passages reveal that a person's life, which is created in God's image, is precious and to be valued. All people are to be treated with respect, and considered valuable in God's sight.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read Acts 16:16-18, directing the group to listen for the people, the problem, the action, and the response identified in these verses.

**SUMMARIZE:** Soliciting input from the group, briefly summarize information under Verses 16-18 in the PSG (pp. 75-76). Stress that Paul and Silas realized the problem was distorting and confusing their mission, and action to remove the demon would not be a popular decision.

**ASK:** *How would you describe the difference between Paul's view of the slave girl and the owners' views of her? How would you define the motives of each in how they related to her? (PSG, p. 77)*

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud Verse 19, as you encourage the group to listen for the owners' reaction to Paul's action. Note they revealed that she would no longer be profitable for them.

**EXPLAIN:** *The young girl's owners had little regard for what might be best for her, and thought only of the potential profit they had lost. They were blind to the power of Christ and the value of each person, seeing only their own self-interest. Note the result of Paul's action: being placed in jail.*

**ASK:** *How might someone justify the response of the owners? How do people use the same justification today for devaluing human life? (PSG, p. 78)*

**TRANSITION:** *The writer of Psalms celebrated the wonder of creation and the value of each person. From the moment of conception God is at work in each person's life.*

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 139:13-16, while the group listens for God's actions and the psalmist's response.

**DISCUSS:** *How does the analogy of the weaver and the "mother's womb" illustrate God's creation?*

**DIRECT:** Point out the information under Verse 14 (PSG, pp. 78–79) and call on a volunteer to read the first paragraph to re-emphasize the psalmist’s response to His complex creation.

**GUIDE:** Direct attention to **Pack Item 13** (*Poster: Psalm 139:14*). Ask: *Why is it difficult to comprehend how remarkable all human life is?* Read the verse aloud together and ask the group to turn to someone sitting close to them and paraphrase or explain what this verse means to them. Examine the verse more closely to identify the actions of God and the response of the psalmist. Discuss what it means to be “wonderfully made.” Remind the group that Psalm 139:14 is the memory verse for this session.

**EXAMINE:** Guide the group to examine Verses 15-16 for specific words or phrases that stress the value of each life. Ask: *How do the images shared in these verses support the analogy of the weaver’s creation of a one-of-a-kind masterpiece?*

**TRANSITION:** *The passages in the Old Testament and in the New Testament both reveal the value of all human life. Let’s consider how these passages relate to our lives today.*

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**STATE:** Point out from the PSG (p. 78): *Society will tolerate Christians until their actions impact the economy. When that happens, Christian views are seen as a threat and painted as a problem, regardless of the truth.* Explain that the reality of the statement is noted in Acts 16 and in our world today.

**EVALUATE:** *How do the words of the psalmist relate to the slave girl freed from the demon by Paul? How does our understanding of both passages impact our treatment of all people from conception to death?* (PSG, p. 80)

**RESPOND:** Call attention to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 81): *With your group, create a list of people or groups in your community who need an advocate. Propose ways the group could be that advocate. What role can you play in helping the class be an advocate for one of those persons or groups?*

**REFLECT:** Lead the group to consider silently if there are individuals or people groups their own actions or attitudes may have marginalized or devalued. Encourage the group to confess actions or attitudes that they need to adjust and to identify changes that need to be made or actions that need to be taken.

**PRAY:** Thank God and offer praise for the way He has made each of us special. Offer praise that all human life is to be valued. Ask God to open our eyes to groups or individuals who appear devalued or isolated today.



## PRACTICE

- Early in the week, contact group members and encourage them to continue memorizing Psalm 139:14.
- Prayerfully study the attendance patterns of group members to determine if there may be individuals who might feel alienated from the group. Develop a plan to reach out to them with extra encouragement.
- Contact anyone absent from the last group session, making sure they have a PSG and are aware that the studies in Acts will continue next week with Acts 18–19.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the focus idea, select a picture that will evoke an emotional response from the group (fireman rescue, couple with a newborn baby, children of different ethnicities playing together). Ask the group how the picture makes them feel. *What is it about the image in the picture that causes you to react?*

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- Before reading Acts 16:16-19, enlist three volunteers to act out the verses as they are read aloud. Following the role play, debrief by discussing how each person in the verses was impacted by the scene. Be sure to include the group praying in the discussion.
- Following the discussion of Psalm 139:13-16, challenge group members to reread, reflect, and memorize Psalm 139:14 during the next few days.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

If there is someone in your church or community who works in a crisis pregnancy center, in elder care, or with a human trafficking advocacy group, invite them to share briefly about their role and ways the group might support them.

Encourage the group to visualize the image of a person they see frequently who may not feel valued and to determine a specific action they could take to support this person.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play the song “Oh, How He Loves You and Me,” by Kurt Kaiser, as the group gathers or distribute the lyrics and lead in singing the chorus.

# INCOMPLETE PICTURE

God uses believers to help others better understand the gospel.

## ACTS 18:24-28; 19:1-7

### MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 18:28

- **READ** Acts 18:24–19:41, First Thoughts (p. 94), and Understand the Context (pp. 94–95). Highlight words or phrases that describe Apollos and the twelve disciples in Ephesus.
- **STUDY** Acts 18:24-28; 19:1-7, using Explore the Text (pp. 95–99). Research a religious group that only partially accepts the gospel of Christ and reflect on what would need to be shared with this group for there to be a complete understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Review **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*) and obtain information about both Corinth and Ephesus from **PACK ITEM 7** (*Poster: Key Cities in Paul's Journeys*).
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 100–101) and More Ideas (p. 102). Refer to [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras) for more ways to grow as a leader. Consult *QuickSource* (available from LifeWay.com), looking for ways to incorporate the questions and the Object Lesson into this week's study.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides;  A favorite children's book; and copies of  **PACK ITEM 4** (*Time Line: Acts*). Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*);  **PACK ITEM 6** (*Poster: Paul's Missionary Team Members*); and  **PACK ITEM 7** (*Poster: Key Cities in Paul's Journeys*).



## KEY DOCTRINE

### Scripture

All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Paul and the Church at Ephesus” in the Winter 2017-2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

## BIBLE SKILL

*Create a compare and contrast chart to study a passage.*

On one side of a vertical line, write words and phrases that describe Apollos (Acts 18:24-28). On the other side, write words and phrases that describe the twelve disciples of John (Acts 19:1-7). Use the chart to gain a clearer understanding of why Apollos received further instruction while the twelve received baptism in the name of Jesus.

# FIRST THOUGHTS

We frequently encounter “incomplete pictures.” These pictures may include buildings under construction, stories partially overheard, or the scene of an auto accident. Our brain tries to complete the picture in an effort to make sense out of what we see. We may jump to conclusions based on our incomplete picture. Sometimes, we get it right, sometimes we don’t.

(In PSG, p. 82) **How can filling in the blanks of a story or picture get a person in trouble? How can knowing only part of the picture or story lead to confusion?**

As we continue studying Paul’s missionary work this week, we will find two separate occasions where he encountered people with incomplete pictures of what it means to be followers of Christ. In one case, Apollos only required additional instruction but John’s twelve disciples required more.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ACTS 18:24–19:41

After Paul completed his message at the Areopagus, he left Athens and went to Corinth (Acts 18:1). He met Aquila and Priscilla, who authorities had expelled from Rome because of an edict from Claudius. When Paul discovered they were followers of Christ and tentmakers by trade—his own occupation—he stayed with them while in Corinth. Paul, consistent with his normal mission strategy, reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, attempting to persuade both Jews and Greeks that Jesus was the Messiah.

When Paul’s Jewish audience rejected his message and began to shout blasphemies, he moved strategically to the Gentiles in Corinth. One of his early Gentile converts was Titius Justus, likely a Roman citizen, whose house was providentially next to the synagogue. Titius Justus placed his house at Paul’s disposal; therefore, when people who had become accustomed to hearing Paul preach desired to hear more about Jesus, they found him readily available. As a result, Crispus, the leader of the synagogue Paul had just left, was converted and baptized by Paul. Luke tells us that many other Corinthians believed and were baptized (18:8).

Paul’s success led to a lengthy and productive ministry in Corinth as he stayed with them eighteen months (18:11). As we might anticipate, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the judge’s bench. They accused him of persuading people to worship God contrary to the law. The charge was that Paul was preaching a religion not authorized by Roman law. Gallio listened to the charges and dismissed them, ruling that

the dispute had to do with differing interpretations within Jewish law. Gallio's ruling that the gospel shared the protection which Roman law extended to the Jewish religion served as a precedent for other Roman judges, and thus provided protection for the missionaries to continue their evangelistic ministry.

Paul left Corinth with Priscilla and Aquila, and when he reached Ephesus, he left Priscilla and Aquila there. After briefly speaking in the synagogue, he left Ephesus with a promise to return if the Lord willed. Paul landed at Caesarea and first went to greet the church at Jerusalem. When he had completed his task in Jerusalem, he went down to greet his home church in Antioch (18:22). He now began his third missionary journey, traveling through the Galatian territory and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples (18:23). The journey would cover a distance of 1,500 miles. After encouraging his old friends in the churches of South Galatia, Paul was now free to return to Ephesus.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### A PARTIAL WITNESS (ACTS 18:24-26)

#### VERSE 24

We are introduced to a new character in the drama of the gospel's expansion. While Paul was still traveling the Galatian territory and Phrygia, **Apollos ... arrived in Ephesus**. Apollos came from a Jewish family of Alexandria in Egypt. The gospel must have reached Egypt at a very early date. We know that there were people from Egypt who were present at Pentecost (Acts 2:10). It is thus possible that converts from Pentecost returned to Egypt and began to spread the gospel. However Apollos was converted, it is clear that he had excelled in his understanding of the Scriptures. Luke described him as being both **eloquent** and **competent in the use of the Scriptures**. This description explains why some in Corinth wanted to identify themselves as followers of Apollos (1 Cor. 1:12).

#### VERSE 25

Luke further described Apollos in three ways. He had been **instructed in the way of the Lord**, he was **fervent in spirit**, and he taught **accurately about Jesus**. He may have learned about Jesus from the disciples of John the Baptist since he **knew only of John's baptism**. Whatever the case, it is clear that he knew the message of the gospel accurately up to a point.

*Fervent in spirit* is likely a description of his temperament and thus many translations use a small "s." The reluctance to see it as a reference to the Holy Spirit is because of the one deficiency mentioned—he knew only John's baptism. In both the Gospel narratives and Acts, it is the giving of the Spirit that distinguishes the baptism of John from that of Jesus (Mark 1:8; Acts 1:5). Apollos taught what he knew with accuracy. His knowledge and teaching were accurate but incomplete. He knew

### ACTS 18:24

<sup>24</sup> Now a Jew named Apollos, a native Alexandrian, an eloquent man who was competent in the use of the Scriptures, arrived in Ephesus.

### ACTS 18:25

<sup>25</sup> 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.

only of John's baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

## Profile of Apollos

- *A native of Alexandria in Egypt*
- *An eloquent speaker*
- *Excelled in his understanding of Old Testament Scripture*
- *Received instruction from Priscilla and Aquila*
- *Frequently mentioned by Paul (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4,5,22; 4:6; 16:12; Titus 3:13)*
- *Some scholars think Apollos was the writer of the Book of Hebrews, but this is speculation.*

### ACTS 18:26

<sup>26</sup> 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.

#### VERSE 26

As we might anticipate from Luke's description of Apollos, he spoke **boldly in the synagogue**. Priscilla and Aquila, who had remained in Ephesus, were impressed by his teaching but recognized there was additional information that Apollos needed. The couple invited him to their home and **explained the way of God to him more accurately**.

We should note the sensitivity of this couple in their decision to give Apollos private instruction rather than to correct him publicly, which could have had a detrimental impact on Apollos's ministry and the spread of the gospel in Ephesus. Luke did not indicate any specifics concerning the instruction, but based on the context, we can surmise that it certainly involved baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit. When we contrast this narrative with the one to follow (19:1-7), it appears that Apollos' understanding was simply incomplete and thus there is no mention that he was baptized again.

(In PSG, p. 85) **What are the dangers of a person teaching a partial truth and teaching it well?**

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(In PSG, p. 85) **How did the approach taken by Aquila and Priscilla strengthen Apollos as opposed to tearing him down? What principles for confronting a person did they follow?**

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## A COMPLETE WITNESS (ACTS 18:27-28)

### VERSES 27-28

After his instruction, Apollos desired to go to Corinth, where Paul had already established a church. It may be that Priscilla and Aquila told Apollos of their ministry there with Paul and this may have fueled Apollos's desire to minister in Corinth. At this early stage in the development of the church, letters of recommendation were essential to protect the church from theological error. Paul wrote one to Rome for Phoebe (Rom. 16:1). It seems probable that Priscilla and Aquila were involved in writing the letter of recommendation to the church at Corinth since they were well known by the Corinthians. Nonetheless, it was from **the brothers and sisters**. It is clear that the letter of recommendation was an official act of a local church and was addressed to the members of the church in Corinth.

When Apollos arrived in Corinth, he both helped the existing believers and continued to reach out evangelistically to the Jews in Corinth. Luke's description of believers as **those who by grace had believed** is appropriate since it accurately describes Paul's message (Eph. 2:8-9). Apollos's unique combination of zeal and biblical knowledge uniquely prepared him to debate the Jews of Corinth. He would have used Old Testament prophecies to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. Luke's brief description of Apollos's ministry in Corinth squares well with what Paul wrote about him in First Corinthians. Paul referred to Apollos as a fellow servant of the Lord whose unique ministry was to water the seed Paul had sown (1 Cor. 3:5).

**It is clear that the church is strengthened when believers with a depth of understanding share what they know with other believers. How can we apply this truth today?**

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## AN INCOMPLETE FAITH (ACTS 19:1-7)

### VERSE 1

Paul took the higher and more direct route rather than the more traveled trade route and arrived in Ephesus after Apollos had left for Corinth. Upon arriving, Paul met with some **disciples**. The use of the word *disciples* accompanied by the following discussion of these twelve men has raised a significant question that will impact our understanding of this passage. Does the use of the word *disciples* indicate they were genuine believers or were they simply disciples of John the Baptist?

Some commentators argue that the use of "disciple" by Luke is a strong indicator these men were genuine followers of Christ. They argue that if these men were simply disciples of John and not disciples of Christ, Luke would have made that clear. Further, they suggest that the question by Paul—"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" (v. 2)—strongly

### ACTS 18:27-28

<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating through the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah.

### ACTS 19:1

<sup>1</sup> While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior regions and came to Ephesus. He found some disciples

suggests that Paul gave them the benefit of the doubt and presumed they were believers. They are pointing to the use of the word *believed*.

Still other commentators argue that these men were disciples of John. They note that Luke used the term *disciples* for followers of John the Baptist in his gospel (Luke 5:33; 7:18f). Some even point to the fact that this is the only time in Acts that the word *disciple* occurs without a definite article, and thus Luke was distinguishing these men from Christian disciples. Further, they point to the response that these men had not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. The explanation by Paul of John's baptism as one of preparation further indicates that these men had not yet accepted Christ in the full sense of what it means to be an authentic follower of Christ. Their immediate response to Paul's message and their willingness to be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus further indicates that they recognized their need to accept Christ as Savior and to be baptized in order to be authentic disciples of Christ.

On the whole it seems that the preponderance of evidence suggests that they were not disciples of Jesus and that Luke brought the story of Apollos's further instruction together with the baptism of the twelve to illustrate the difference between incomplete and inadequate understanding. This is a particularly relevant passage because we face similar issues in the church today.

## ACTS 19:2

<sup>2</sup> 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."

## ACTS 19:3-4

<sup>3</sup> "Into what then were you baptized?" he asked them. "Into John's baptism," they replied. <sup>4</sup> 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."

### VERSE 2

The rather blunt question—"***Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?***"—strongly suggests that Paul sensed something lacking in their understanding of the gospel. Obviously they had not advanced beyond John's initial preaching of a baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah (see Luke 3:3-6). The response by the disciples is a bit surprising since John consistently taught that the One coming after Him would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16). What their response could mean is that they had not yet heard of Jesus' death and resurrection or of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. They had simply not heard that John's message had been fulfilled.

### VERSES 3-4

Thus Paul asked a second question to gain further clarity—"***Into what then were you baptized?***" Their response to Paul's second question confirms that their understanding of the gospel had not progressed past that of John's message of repentance from sin in preparation for the Lord's coming. Their baptism was a baptism of expectation rather than one of fulfillment. Their answers may further indicate that these men had made John the center of their attention rather than the One to whom John had pointed them. Paul gently but firmly told them that John had told the people that they should ***believe in the one who would come after him, that is, in Jesus***. John Polhill writes, "The real deficiency of these twelve or so was not their baptism. It was much more serious. They failed to recognize Jesus as the one whom John had proclaimed, as the promised Messiah."<sup>1</sup>

## VERSE 5

The men immediately responded enthusiastically. **When they heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.** Perhaps Luke wanted to show us the difference between the spiritual condition of Apollos and these twelve. Apollos had been thoroughly instructed “in the way of the Lord” (Acts 18:25), whereas these men were unacquainted with the gospel, knowing nothing of the resurrection and accompanying ministry of the Holy Spirit. They knew only the preparatory message of John, but John had prepared them well. When they heard the rest of the story, they immediately responded to the good news and were baptized in Jesus’ name. They were not re-baptized, but rather they were baptized into Christ once and for all. Apollos was not required to be baptized again because his baptism was seen as pointing beyond itself to Christ. Apollos simply needed additional instruction. This passage illustrates the promise that those who seek will find. When the twelve disciples heard the gospel, they knew this was the One they had been seeking.

## The Holy Spirit is essential to conversion and the presence of the Spirit is indication that one is a child of God.

### VERSES 6-7

After Paul baptized the twelve, he **laid his hands on them** and **the Holy Spirit came on them.** The evidence of the Spirit was the same as at Pentecost—**they began to speak in other tongues and to prophesy.** The laying on of hands by Paul reminds us of a similar gesture by Peter and John when the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit (8:14-17). However, it is precarious to attempt to establish patterns concerning the coming of the Spirit and actions such as the laying on of hands or the manifestation of tongues or prophecies. When we look at the entire Acts narrative, we find that the Spirit came in various times and ways. Clearly the Holy Spirit is essential to conversion and the presence of the Spirit indicates that people are children of God. In Romans 8:14 Paul wrote, “all those led by God’s Spirit are God’s sons.” He further noted, “the Spirit himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God’s children” (v. 16).

**Today we still encounter various incomplete understandings of Christianity similar to those present in the early church. How can we address these issues in our churches? What does this say about the importance of small group Bible studies?**

## ACTS 19:5

<sup>5</sup> When they heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

## ACTS 19:6-7

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> Now there were about twelve men in all.

1. John B. Polhill, *Acts* in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 399.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**ASK:** As group members arrive, share one part of a children's book. Invite them to finish the story without looking at the rest of the book. After most have arrived, share the full story of the children's book.

**DISCUSS:** *How can filling in the blanks of a story or picture get a person in trouble? How can knowing only part of the picture or story lead to confusion?* (PSG, p. 82)

**TRANSITION:** *As we study the Bible, we may recognize that there are gaps in our understanding that keep us from fully comprehending the whole picture. In today's study, we discover that Apollos had only a partial understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**MINI-LECTURE:** Share that the context for the two passages being examined today is the beginning of Paul's third missionary journey. Use the information under AD 49–62 on **Pack Item 4** (*Time Line: Acts*) to highlight what happened during Paul's second and third missionary journeys.

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud Acts 18:24-26 as the group listens for who Apollos was and what he was missing.

**EXPLAIN:** Reference Acts 18:1-3,18-19 to explain the connection between Paul's ministry and Priscilla and Aquila. Utilize material in the Understand the Context (pp. 94–95; PSG, p. 83) and **Pack Item 6** (*Poster: Paul's Missionary Team Members*) to discuss the role of Aquila and Priscilla during Paul's second missionary journey.

**DISCUSS:** *What are the dangers of a person teaching a partial truth and teaching it well? How did the approach taken by Aquila and Priscilla strengthen Apollos as opposed to tearing him down? What principles for confronting a person did they follow?* (PSG, p. 85)

**READ:** Enlist someone to read Acts 18:27-28 to discover how effective the instruction provided by Aquila and Priscilla was in Apollos's ministry.

**STUDY:** Form two teams. Instruct one team to examine verse 27 to see how the church in Ephesus supported Apollos and the other team to examine verse 28 to determine what Apollos used as the foundation of his teaching. Encourage them to read the information on their respective verse in the PSG (pp. 85–86). Ask each team to share a brief report.

**ASK:** *How important was it for Apollos to build on his scriptural understanding while preaching and debating in Corinth? What role did his background play in his effectiveness?* (PSG, p. 86)

**TRANSITION:** *While Apollos was sharing in Corinth, Paul met some disciples in Ephesus and began to dialogue with them.*

**LOCATE:** Use **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*) and **Pack Item 7** (*Poster: Key Cities in Paul's Journeys*) to locate Ephesus and Corinth and explain their importance in Paul's journeys.

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud Acts 19:1-4 as the group listens for the missing piece with these disciples.

**STATE:** *Paul seemed to indicate that the disciples he encountered were not believers in Jesus. They had a rudimentary, incomplete understanding that they had acquired through some direct or indirect contact with John the Baptist. They appeared to have missed John's message that the one coming after him would be greater and would baptize with the Holy Spirit.*

**ASK:** *What are the dangers of trusting in baptism rather than faith in Jesus for one's salvation? How can trusting in baptism cause a false hope?* (PSG, p. 88)

**STUDY:** Reconvene the teams used earlier. This time ask them to complete the Bible Skill activity in the PSG (p. 88) to support the discussion of baptism. Call for volunteers to share what each team learned.

**READ:** Invite someone to read Acts 19:5-7, while the group considers how the background of the men in dialogue with Paul made it easier for them to respond to Paul's message about being a follower of Christ.

**ASK:** *How would you explain the value of baptism and its place in the life of the believer? What can be pointed to as proof that a person is a believer? How can a person be certain of his salvation?* (PSG, p. 89)

**SUMMARIZE:** *The message of John the Baptist prepared the men for a quick response to the message regarding Christ. The presence of the Holy Spirit confirmed their newfound faith in Christ.*

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**REVIEW:** *While Apollos saw a partial understanding, the men in Ephesus saw an incomplete understanding. They were trusting in the baptism of John for their salvation.*

**IDENTIFY:** Lead the group to compare how Priscilla and Aquila approached Apollos and how Paul approached the disciples in Ephesus.

**ASK:** *Are there different approaches to sharing the gospel needed in various settings? Why or why not? When divine appointments occur, what steps do we need to take?*

**RESPOND:** Call attention to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 90): *How can you help others gain a clear picture of the gospel message? What principles did Aquila, Priscilla, and Paul follow? How can you follow those principles as you share the gospel message?*

**GUIDE:** Lead the group to reflect on their own salvation experience to evaluate if they might be missing a piece and to consider actions they might need to strengthen their understanding of Jesus so they can more effectively share their faith. Point them to the inside front cover of the PSG for more information on being a Christian.

**PRAY:** Thank God for the salvation that comes through faith in Jesus Christ and the illumination of the Scriptures in the lives of each person in the group. Pray that each person in the group will have the desire to learn more about Jesus and be willing to accept the challenge of sharing their faith as God places individuals in their path.



## PRACTICE

- Connect with the group via email or text, reminding them that you are praying they will have divine appointments and be effective in sharing their faith.
- Review visitors to the group over the last few months. Determine one person with whom you can share the gospel this week. Follow through by meeting with this person. Be prepared to share your experience during the next session.
- Follow up with other individuals who have visited the group. Answer questions they have and encourage them to return.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the focus idea, lead group members to discuss other religions or cults that accept Jesus as a great prophet or teacher but fail to accept Him as the Son of God. Share that these groups have only a partial grasp on what it means to be a true follower of Christ. Challenge the group to look for insights during today's study for sharing with people who have an incomplete understanding of Jesus.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the study of Acts 18:24-28, lead the group to identify key points that could be made if they were to write a letter of recommendation for Apollos based on the verses.
- To enhance the study of Acts 19:1-7, read Romans 8:16. Then identify areas that Paul questioned to discern whether the twelve men were true followers of Christ. Discuss how he used the information to share what was needed for a complete faith.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to discuss the third question set in the PSG (p. 90): *Reflect on Acts 18:24 and 28. What needs to change so that what was said of Apollos could be said about you? Review these verses regularly as a reminder of the importance of pointing to Scripture when sharing the gospel.* Encourage the group to review this verse regularly as a reminder of the importance of Scripture as the foundation for sharing the gospel.

As a group, ask members to develop a list of possible actions that could be taken to deepen their understanding of the gospel and to better prepare them to share with others. Ask: *What are you doing to deepen your understanding of the gospel? What action can you take in the next seven days that will help you deepen your understanding?* (PSG, p. 90)

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Review the lyrics of the hymn "More About Jesus," by Eliza Hewitt, encouraging the group to consider areas where they need to know more about Jesus. Sing the chorus as a group.

# DELIVERED

Sharing the gospel is worth the sacrifice and effort.

## ACTS 20:22-35

### MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 20:35

- **READ** Acts 20:1–21:26, First Thoughts (p. 104), and Understand the Context (pp. 104–105). Read aloud Acts 20:22-35, imagining that you are Paul delivering the speech to the Ephesian leaders. Try to capture his emotional intensity as he said goodbye.
- **STUDY** Acts 20:22-35, using Explore the Text (pp. 105–109). Note what Paul said about his own testimony and ministry. Examine the warning and the challenges Paul explained they will be facing once when he was gone. Examine **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*) to see the path he followed on his return to Jerusalem. For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas in Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 110–111), More Ideas (p. 112), ideas included in *QuickSource*, and online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras). Brainstorm ways to incorporate the Suggested Music Idea (p. 112) during the session.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog ([LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry](http://LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides. Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*);  **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline of Acts*); and  **PACK ITEM 8** (*Chart: Paul's Recorded Sermons*). For More Ideas, gather:  Unusual epitaphs that share a legacy about the person to be remembered; and  A magnifying glass.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Evangelism and Missions*

The new birth of man's spirit by God's Holy Spirit means the birth of love for others.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Paul: From His Arrest to His Imprisonment" available digitally in the Winter 2017-2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator* for Explore the Bible at LifeWay. [com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://com/BiblicalIllustrator).

## BIBLE SKILL

*Compare similar experiences.*

Compare Paul's address to the elders from Ephesus found in Acts 20:28-38 with one of the following farewell addresses: 1 Samuel 20:41-42; 2 Kings 2:9-14; or Ruth 1:8-14. What did your comparison reveal about the person leaving and his or her concern for those left behind? How was hope for a future expressed? What principles do you see about providing a good farewell?

# FIRST THOUGHTS

Goodbyes are hard. They are hard when you know you may never see that person again. When leaving for college, work, or other reasons, you will eventually move on and so will the people left behind. That doesn't negate the relationships, but it does change them. They are no longer your neighbors, your coworkers, or your classmates.

(In PSG, p. 91) **What is the best way to say goodbye to friends? What would you want a friend to remember about you?**

When Paul sent for the elders from Ephesus, he knew that he was telling them goodbye, possibly for the last time. He had been warned by the Holy Spirit that imprisonment awaited him as a consequence of his decision to go to Jerusalem. Nonetheless we can sense Paul's resolve and satisfaction as he sought only to remain faithful to his calling regardless of the cost.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ACTS 20:1–21:26

Last week we left Paul in Ephesus, where he explained the gospel more fully to disciples of John the Baptist. After he baptized them, he preached regularly in the synagogue for three months. When some began slandering "the Way" (Acts 19:9), he left the synagogue and began conducting discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus for two years. His ministry in Ephesus was accompanied by extraordinary miracles. The name of the Lord Jesus was magnified and many who had become believers confessed their practice of magic and brought their books together to be burned. Paul determined that it was time for him to go to Jerusalem and on to Rome. He sent Timothy and Erastus on ahead but he remained in the province of Asia for a while longer (19:21-22).

After Paul's companions left, Demetrius, the silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, rallied other craftsmen in an attempt to stop Paul from preaching that "gods made by hand are not gods" (19:26). No doubt the greater concern was for his business rather than protecting the temple of the great goddess. The people were able to stir up a riot, and they attempted to bring charges against Paul. A city clerk calmed the crowd down by telling them that any substantial charges must be decided in a legal assembly.

Paul then departed for Macedonia, where he had already sent Timothy and Erastus (20:1). He left Macedonia for Greece, where a plot to kill Paul was uncovered, and thus he headed back through Macedonia. After several stops,

Paul returned to his hometown of Troas. His report lasted so long that Eutychus fell from a third story window, and Paul had to revive him (20:8-9). In Paul's haste to make it to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost, he sailed past Ephesus. Nevertheless, when he stopped at Miletus he sent for the elders from Ephesus in order that he might deliver his farewell address and caution them about challenges they would face.

In the first part of the address, Paul reminded the elders about his passion and integrity while he was in their midst. He spoke of ministering with humility and tears even amidst the plots brought against him by the Jews. In spite of the opposition, Paul never shrank back from teaching the truth both publicly and privately. Throughout his ministry he had called both Jews and Gentiles to repentance and faith (20:18-21).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### HIS COMMITMENT (ACTS 20:22-24)

#### VERSES 22-23

In the second section of his address, Paul explained to the Ephesus elders his plan to go to Jerusalem despite the dangers that faced him there. Paul had decided to go to Jerusalem while still in Ephesus. Acts 19:21 states, "After these events, Paul resolved by the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem. 'After I've been there,' he said, 'It is necessary for me to see Rome as well.'" Notice that the Holy Spirit prompted his resolve. Paul was fully committed to be faithful to God's mission, not knowing what reception he would get other than afflictions.

Some commentators are troubled by the mention of Paul's being **compelled by the Spirit** to go to Jerusalem followed by the warning of the Spirit that **chains and afflictions** awaited him. But Paul's desire to go and the warnings of suffering were not at odds. The Spirit was simply preparing him for what awaited him and assuring him that God was with him. This would not be the last warning the Holy Spirit would give Paul. While he was in Caesarea staying with Philip the evangelist, a prophet named Agabus delivered a visual message from the Holy Spirit. He took Paul's belt and tied his own feet and hands, indicating that this is what the Jews in Jerusalem would do with the man who owns that belt. Paul responded that he was willing to be bound and die, if necessary, for the name of the Lord Jesus (21:10-14).

#### VERSE 24

In spite of the warnings, Paul was prepared to go. He was not afraid to face the dangers in Jerusalem, for he was prepared to surrender his life **to testify to the gospel of God's grace**. This verse should cause us to think of Paul's testimony in several of his epistles. In Galatians 2:20 he declared that he had already died to self. He had been crucified with Christ, and the life he now lived was the result of Christ living in him. It is difficult to frighten

### ACTS 20:22-23

<sup>22</sup> "And now I am on my way to Jerusalem, compelled by the Spirit, not knowing what I will encounter there, <sup>23</sup> except that in every town the Holy Spirit warns me that chains and afflictions are waiting for me.

### ACTS 20:24

<sup>24</sup> 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.

a dead man! In Philippians 2:17 he expressed his willingness to be poured out as a drink of the sacrifice and service of his faith. Paul's motivation was not self-preservation; his desire was to complete his kingdom assignment and to testify to the gospel of grace. Paul, the former Pharisee who had boasted in his accomplishments, gladly traded his works righteousness for God's amazing grace (see Phil. 3:4-10).

The phrase ***finish my course*** describes well the apostle's life-long passion. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-25 he compared ministry to competing in a race. He exhorted his readers to run in such a way that they would win an imperishable crown. Paul disciplined himself so that he would not be disqualified in terms of his ministry. In Philippians 2:17 he spoke of his desire to boast in the day of Christ that he didn't run in vain or labor for nothing. In 2 Timothy 4:7, written near the end of his ministry, Paul wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Each of us should be motivated by the singular goal of completing the tasks assigned to us by the Lord Jesus.

**What does it mean to you to fulfill God's purpose for your life? Do you honestly believe that faithfully fulfilling God's purpose brings contentment?**

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**Each of us should be motivated by the singular goal of completing the tasks assigned to us by the Lord Jesus.**

### **HIS CONCERN (ACTS 20:25-31)**

#### **VERSE 25**

Paul fully understood that it was unlikely these Ephesian elders and others among whom he had ministered would ever see him again. First, Paul had already planned to move to the western part of the Empire, with Rome as his new base of operation (see 19:21). In his letter to the Romans, Paul spoke of his sense of completion of ministry in the east and his desire for the believers in Rome to help him to Spain. "But now I no longer have any work to do in these regions, and I have strongly desired for many years to come to you whenever I travel to Spain. For I hope to see you when I pass through and to be assisted by you for my journey there, once I have first enjoyed your company for a while" (Rom. 15:23-24). Second, it is clear that Paul understood that his ministry in Jerusalem could result in his own death. Nevertheless, he was committed to be obedient to God's call.

#### **ACTS 20:25**

<sup>25</sup> And now I know that none of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will ever see me again.

## VERSES 26-27

Before his departure, Paul wanted to remind the Ephesian elders that he had fully and faithfully discharged his work in their midst. He declared that he was **innocent** of anyone's blood since he had boldly declared **the whole plan of God**. Paul appears to be drawing from the watchman analogy found in Ezekiel 33:1-6. The watchman was responsible for blowing the trumpet of warning, but he was not responsible for the response of those he warned. Paul had preached the whole gospel, calling men to repentance and faith, and now the responsibility rested with them. This statement should not be understood as Paul's defense of his own ministry, but rather as an example to the Ephesian elders as they dealt with heresies that would soon arise.

## VERSE 28

Paul called upon the elders to **be on guard** for themselves and **all the flock**. Paul saw the church being threatened from without and from within, and for that reason the elders needed to remain vigilant for themselves and the church. The concern for sound doctrine and guarding the church from heresy is a constant theme of the Pastoral Letters which Paul wrote near the end of his ministry (see 1 Tim. 1:3-4; 6:3-4; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:15; 4:3-4; Titus 2:1).

A number of significant terms are used in this passage to describe the ministry of those who are over the flock. We need to be reminded that Paul was meeting with the elders (*presbuterio*, Acts 20:17). He affirmed that God had appointed them as **overseers** (*episcopoi*), **to shepherd** (*poimenas*) **the church of God**. This passage clearly affirms that *overseers* and *elders* refer to the same group of people who had a pastoral function in the life of the church. There is certainly no suggestion here of a monarchical bishop ruling over a number of congregations. That system of church leadership did not develop until the second century. At this point, the words *elders* and *overseers* are virtually interchangeable and are used for those who function as shepherds.

What is important to notice is that these men were **appointed by the Holy Spirit**. As we read the Book of Acts, we discover that Paul appointed the first elders in his church plants (14:23). Later, this responsibility was assumed by local churches. Like the deacons (6:3), the overseers were filled with and gifted by the Spirit for the tasks to which they were called.

The serious nature of the ministry to which the overseers had been called is clearly seen as Paul spoke of the **church of God, which he purchased with his own blood**. The word *church* is often used to refer to a local congregation, such as is the case when Paul spoke of "the church of God at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2), but it can also be used to speak of the universal church made up of all who are in Christ. The key distinctive is that the church belongs to God because He purchased it with His blood. The blood was that which God's Son shed on the cross. Since God paid such a high price for this redeemed community, the elders must guard themselves and their flocks.

## ACTS 20:26-27

<sup>26</sup> Therefore I declare to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, <sup>27</sup> because I did not avoid declaring to you the whole plan of God.

## ACTS 20:28

<sup>28</sup> 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.

## ACTS 20:29-30

<sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

<sup>30</sup> Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into following them.

### VERSES 29-30

Paul saw two potential hazards for the health of the church after his departure. The first involved an attack from people outside the church who would come in among them like **savage wolves**. The second involved people **from your own number** who would **rise up** with false teaching, luring people away from the truth. *Savage wolves* is a graphic description that would have been familiar to Paul's audience. In Jewish apocalyptic literature and early Christian writing, "wolves" was often used to describe false teachers. It is likely that early Christian usage of this term was influenced by Jesus' warning in Matthew 7:15, "Be on your guard against false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves." You might also recall Jesus' warning about false shepherds who are unwilling to lay down their own lives for the sheep. The hireling runs away when he sees the wolf coming. "The wolf then snatches and scatters them" (John 10:12).

The threat from within can be especially devastating because it catches the flock unaware. Church members, perhaps impacted by the savage wolves, are caught up in the false teaching and **lure** others to follow them. These people have developed trusted relationships within the church and thus have a ready and unsuspecting audience for their false doctrine.

We know that false doctrine had an impact on the church in Ephesus. In chapter 4 of Ephesians, where Paul wrote about spiritual gifts, he focused primarily on the gifted leaders and their role in growing the church to maturity with a specified result, "Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit" (Eph. 4:14). His letters to Timothy address the issue of doctrine, which was significant at the time Timothy was serving the church in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3). The message to the church in Ephesus, recorded in Revelation 2:1-6, shows mixed results. They tested some who claimed to be apostles and found them to be liars, and they hated the practice of the Nicolaitans, but they had lost their first love.

### VERSE 31

It is noteworthy that this section of Paul's speech to the elders begins and ends with a call to vigilance (vv. 28,31). In this final section, Paul used himself as an example of vigilance. He not only referenced his three year ministry, he reminded them of his vital concern, which led to tears. He consistently (**night and day**) did not stop **warning** them **with tears**. He was clearly saying that they needed to be willing to do the same.

(In PSG, p. 97) **In what ways are false teachers like savage wolves? How does the analogy of shepherd versus savage wolf point to the motives of a church leader versus the motives of a false teacher?**

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## ACTS 20:31

<sup>31</sup> Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for three years I never stopped warning each one of you with tears.

## HIS COMMENDATION (ACTS 20:32-35)

### VERSE 32

With Paul leaving, it was more critical than ever for the elders to depend on God and the message of His grace which would build them up. No doubt some of these leaders felt unqualified for the difficult task before them, and the departure of Paul created for them further concern. For that reason, Paul assured them of God's presence and the power inherent in the gospel. The **word of his grace** would both **build** them up in the faith and give them assurance of their **inheritance among all who are sanctified**. We should never underestimate the power of God's Word.

### We should never underestimate the power of God's Word.

### VERSES 33-34

Paul ended his address as he began it—by appealing to his own example. In this instance he referred to his practice of working with his own hands to provide for his physical needs. He wanted to give elders confidence that God would meet their needs and also enable them to meet the needs of others. Paul affirmed that his ministry had never been motivated by financial concerns, a fact which is well documented in his other epistles (see 1 Thess. 2:5; 1 Cor. 4:12; 9:12,15). In truth, Paul did not avail himself of his right to receive support for his ministry—a practice which was based on the immaturity of believers like those in the church at Corinth. Paul received support from other churches. For example, the brethren in Macedonia fully supplied his financial needs so that Paul would not have to be a burden to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:7-9). In one of his final letters, Paul declared that elders who ruled well and worked hard at teaching and preaching the word were worthy of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17-18). The context, with its reference to muzzling an ox, clearly refers to financial compensation.

### VERSE 35

Paul ended with a reference to the words of the Lord Jesus. Even though these exact words are not found in any gospel, there is no reason to doubt their authenticity. No doubt there were many acts and sayings of the Lord that were not recorded in the Gospels (see John 21:25). Greed is a universal human problem and the only antidote is generosity.

### What practical steps can we take to guard ourselves against greed?

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### ACTS 20:32

<sup>32</sup> 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.

### ACTS 20:33-34

<sup>33</sup> I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that I worked with my own hands to support myself and those who are with me.

### ACTS 20:35

<sup>35</sup> 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.'"

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**LIST:** As the group arrives, begin saying goodbye in different languages or direct them to a prepared poster with goodbye written in several languages. Ask the group to share what the oral or written words have in common. (Words might include: *adios, sayonara, arrivederci, ciao, shalom, or au revoir.*)

**DISCUSS:** *What is the best way to say goodbye to friends? What would you want a friend to remember about you?* (PSG, p. 91)

**GUIDE:** *In today's study Paul will say goodbye to his fellow believers in Ephesus where he had ministered for three years. He will share that he won't see them again in this life. His final message to the believers provides a warning and a challenge.*

**TRANSITION:** Use Understand the Context (pp. 104–105; PSG, p. 92) and **Pack Item 2** (*Outline of Acts*) to identify and explain the importance of Paul's third missionary journey. Then locate the route on **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Instruct a volunteer to read aloud Acts 20:22-24, while the group listens to Paul's opening words to discover what he relied on for guidance and what he valued in life.

**DISCUSS:** *How did Paul's goal of sharing the gospel impact his decision to go to Jerusalem?* (PSG, p. 92) *How does a warning serve as a way to prepare for what is ahead? How does understanding the value of the gospel give a person the strength to endure difficulties that result from the gospel?* (PSG, p. 94) *In what ways did the hardships that Paul faced strengthen his faith and determination?*

**TRANSITION:** *Paul's race to share the gospel would continue, but first he had a message to share with the believers in Ephesus.*

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud Acts 20:25-31, while the group listens to discover Paul's specific message for the church in Ephesus and its leaders.

**EXPLAIN:** *Paul had spent three years in Ephesus, and the news that they would not see him again was very difficult for his fellow believers. Knowing his departure was at hand, Paul had a warning and a challenge for the leaders in the Ephesus church. This speech is the only recorded speech of Paul in Acts directed specifically to believers.*

**REVIEW:** Use **Pack Item 8** (*Chart: Paul's Recorded Sermons*) to discuss the theme of Paul's sermon to the Ephesian leaders. Then compare his sermon themes to unbelievers in other cities. Ask: *How did Paul's sermons change based on each city's needs?*

**STUDY:** Create two teams to reread Acts 20:25-31. Assign one team to examine the verses for the warning that Paul shared (vv. 25-27), and the other team to identify actions Paul encouraged to remain strong in his absence (vv. 28-31). Lead each team to share a brief report.

**DISCUSS:** *What might keep a person from being able to make the same claim Paul made in verses 26-27? What makes it hard to share the gospel with everyone a person meets? (PSG, p. 95)*

**SUMMARIZE:** *Paul knew that temptations would arise both inside and outside the church and that the believers needed to be prepared to discern the truth. The believers could not rely only on themselves but must follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Examining the motive behind a leader's actions would be critical.*

**DISCUSS:** *In what ways are false teachers like savage wolves? How does the analogy of shepherd versus savage wolf point to the motives of a church leader versus the motives of a false teacher? (PSG, p. 97) How can we recognize false teachers today?*

**TRANSITION:** *Paul closed his message by relating how he worked among the church and challenging them to follow his example. He let them know that he had shown them everything needed to continue the work of sharing the gospel.*

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read Acts 20:32-35, while the others listen for the specific examples that Paul shared from his time with the church in Ephesus.

**LIST:** Lead the group to identify the specific examples Paul listed in Acts 20:32-35.

**DISCUSS:** *How do the actions listed relate to the motivation for service? Why would it have been important for these church leaders to be aware of their motives for ministry? (PSG, p. 98)*

**STATE:** *In today's study Paul shared his testimony, addressed what would happen when he was gone, and committed the ongoing ministry in Ephesus to the church leaders. He encouraged them to focus on others by being generous in both thought and action.*

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## **SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)**

**TRANSITION:** *Reflecting on Paul's message, consider how relevant his message is for us as believers and church leaders today.*

**REVIEW:** Read the three bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 99), emphasizing the words *contentment*, *diligent*, and *guard*. Guide the group to define each word and consider the actions these words imply.

**EVALUATE:** Form pairs to work together to answer the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 99): *List ways God has used you to make a difference in the lives of other believers and His church. Thank Him for the opportunities and ask Him to show you how you can impact those outside the church. What actions do you need to take based on what God showed you?*

**PRAY:** Read Acts 20:36, sharing that Paul completed his message and then he knelt and prayed with them. Close in prayer, thanking God for opportunities to share the gospel and asking Him to help each member of the group be more faithful in sharing the gospel and encouraging others.



## PRACTICE

- Early in the week contact group members to thank them for participation in the study of Acts. Encourage them to look for opportunities to share their testimonies during the week through their words and actions.
- Consider your own testimony and seek an opportunity to share your faith. Be prepared to share your experience during the next study.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Display unusual epitaphs that share a legacy about the person to be remembered (search the Internet using the term “unusual epitaphs”). Connect the epitaphs to Paul’s legacy in Ephesus. Be prepared to explain how each person leaves a legacy. Share this quote from Billy Sunday, an evangelist and professional baseball player: “Live so that when the final summons comes you will leave something more behind you than an epitaph on a tombstone or an obituary in a newspaper.”<sup>1</sup>

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To support the discussion of Acts 20:25-31 and false teachers, display a magnifying glass and share: *This study calls us to evaluate our stand for Christ. It requires us to examine God’s Word to avoid false teaching and to act in obedience. If a magnifying glass were placed over your life, what would be visible for all to see? Are there changes you need to make?* Challenge the group to look for opportunities to share their testimony, being prepared to share their experiences during the next session.
- To enhance the study of Acts 20:32-35, complete the Bible Skill activity on page 98 of the PSG: *Compare Paul’s address to the elders from Ephesus found in Acts 20:28-38 with one of the following farewell addresses: 1 Samuel 20:41-42; 2 Kings 2:9-14; or Ruth 1:8-14. What did your comparison reveal about the person leaving and his or her concern for those left behind? How was hope for a future expressed? What principles do you see about providing a good farewell?*

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to complete the third question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 99): *Reflect on Acts 20:35, considering ways you can follow Jesus’ words. What is one anonymous giving action you can do this week that would point someone to Christ? Record the impact that act had on you and the recipient.*

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Lead the group to listen to the lyrics or sing together “The Cause of Christ,” by Kari Jobe, to close the session.

1. As quoted in William T. Ellis, *Billy Sunday: The Man and His Message* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959).

# THE TESTIMONY

The gospel transforms people from sinners into instruments of God.

## ACTS 22:3-8,15-22

### MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 22:15

- **READ** Acts 21:27–23:22, First Thoughts (p. 114), and Understand the Context (pp. 114–115). While reading, consider why Paul might have felt like the Jews in Jerusalem would be open to what he had to say about Jesus.
- **STUDY** Acts 22:3-8,15-22, using Explore the Text on pages 115–119. As you study, note how Paul structured his testimony. Highlight words and phrases Paul used to describe himself. For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study on pages 120–121 and More Ideas on page 122. Refer to the resources at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras) for more ideas.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides; and  Enlist a group member to share a testimony of how Christ changed his or her life. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*); and  **PACK ITEM 4** (*Time Line: Acts*). For More Ideas gather:  A before and after picture will be needed if you are using the alternate idea for Focus Attention.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Salvation*

Salvation involves the redemption of the whole man, and is offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

## FIRST THOUGHTS

Our life stories are important. The stories we choose to tell give others a picture of what's important to us and helps them understand why we think the way we do. Even though some of our best stories have been told repeatedly, we never seem to tire of telling them. In fact, our passion for them grows every time we tell them.

(In PSG, p. 100) **What stories from your life do you find yourself always sharing with others? How do your stories impact the lives of the people you tell?**

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In Acts 21:17, Paul arrived in Jerusalem. Leaders of the Jerusalem church told Paul of a rumor circulating that he was telling Jews to disregard the Mosaic law and rituals such as circumcision. After some Jews from Asia incited a crowd against Paul, he addressed the crowd by sharing his testimony.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Paul Before His Conversion" an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Winter 2017-2018 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 21:27–23:22**

In last week's session, we looked at Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders. After a tearful goodbye, he set sail for Jerusalem. On his journey he stopped briefly at Tyre. As the crew was unloading cargo, Paul found some disciples and stayed with them for seven days. Prompted by the Spirit, they warned Paul not to go to Jerusalem (Acts 21:4). Undeterred, Paul returned to the ship and sailed to Ptolemais [TAHL uh MAY uhs], staying for one day before he went to Caesarea. At Caesarea he stayed with Philip the evangelist. While Paul was there, Agabus, a prophet we met in Antioch (11:28), took his belt and tied his own feet and hands as a prophetic demonstration of what would happen to Paul in Jerusalem. When the people begged Paul not to go, he merely responded that he was ready to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus (21:13).

Upon arrival in Jerusalem, Paul met with James and the leaders, who rejoiced with him concerning what God had accomplished through him among the Gentiles (21:19-20). Nevertheless, they warned him that many in Jerusalem had heard rumors that Paul was teaching the Jews who lived among the Gentiles to abandon Moses by not having their children circumcised. The elders devised a plan that they thought might assure others that Paul still had a high regard for the law. There were four men who had taken a temporary Nazirite vow (see Num. 6:2-8) but had some form of ceremonial defilement. Therefore, they had to undergo a purification rite before Passover. It was decided that Paul would purify himself along with them and pay for them to have their heads shaved (Acts 21:24).

The next day Paul entered the temple with the four men who had taken the vow. As the seven days for the purification rite was about to end, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul in the temple complex and stirred up the crowd against him. They not only accused him of teaching against the law and the temple, they also indicated that he had brought Greeks into the temple. They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with Paul and jumped to the conclusion that Paul had brought Trophimus into the temple complex (21:26-29).

These Jews stirred up the crowd, who dragged Paul from the temple complex in an attempt to kill him. The commander of the regiment rescued Paul, but hearing conflicting reports, he ordered that Paul be bound with chains and taken to the barracks. As Paul was about to be taken into the barracks, he identified himself as a Roman citizen and asked the commander if he might address the crowd. When the crowd became silent, Paul addressed them in their Hebrew language. When the crowd heard him speaking their heart language, they became even quieter (21:30–22:2).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### FORMER LIFE (ACTS 22:3-5)

Paul gave a speech that outlined his credentials as a Jewish zealot prior to his conversion. Notice that the speech is both autobiographical and apologetic. It begins with Paul's heritage and upbringing as a strict orthodox Jew (vv. 3-4), then moves to his conversion on the road to Damascus (vv. 5-16), and concludes with his commission by the resurrected Christ (vv. 17-21).

### VERSE 3

It is interesting to note that Paul did not address the charge of desecrating the temple, but rather he focused on his faithfulness to Judaism. The testimony Paul gave on this occasion is similar to the one he would later give before Agrippa (26:2-29) with the notable difference that here Paul focused on his Jewishness. He emphasized his connection to Jerusalem, Gamaliel, and Ananias, and he spoke of his zeal, which was similar to theirs. He was speaking as a Jew to fellow Jews.

Paul was **born in Tarsus** but was reared in Jerusalem and **educated at the feet of Gamaliel**. Some scholars believe that Paul came to Jerusalem at the age of twelve or thirteen when he began his education with Gamaliel. Others believe the phrase translated **brought up in this city** suggests that he was reared from childhood in Jerusalem. In either case, Paul wanted to make his connection to this holy place crystal clear.

We met Gamaliel in Acts 5:33-42, where he advised moderation in responding to Christians. Gamaliel was a disciple of Hillel and the most respected teacher of the day. F.F. Bruce provided a quote from the Mishnah which illustrated the prestige Gamaliel experienced in his later days: "Since Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died there has been no more reverence for the Law, and purity and abstinence died out at the same time."<sup>1</sup> Gamaliel instructed

### BIBLE SKILL

*Compare passages that retell the same event.*

The Book of Acts includes the story of Paul's conversion three times. Compare and contrast Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16; and 26:12-18. What unique details are emphasized in each account? How do you think the specific audience impacted the way Paul told his story?

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### ACTS 22:3

<sup>3</sup> 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."

## ACTS 22:4

<sup>4</sup> I persecuted this Way to the death, arresting and putting both men and women in jail,

## ACTS 22:5

<sup>5</sup> as both the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me. 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.

## ACTS 22:6-7

<sup>6</sup> As I was traveling and approaching Damascus, about noon an intense light from heaven suddenly flashed around me. <sup>7</sup> I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

Paul in the strict way of the Pharisees. Not only was Paul vitally connected to Jerusalem and trained by one of the great teachers of the time, he was **zealous** for the law. He compares his zeal with that which had caused them to drag him from the temple.

### VERSE 4

It was Paul's zeal for God that had prompted him to persecute **this Way**. The term "the Way" was first used in Acts 9:2, where Saul requested letters from the synagogues in Damascus concerning those who belonged to "the Way." This term recurs throughout Paul's speeches recorded in Acts. It seems likely that it was a term used by early Christians as a self-designation. It may have originated with Jesus' speech to His disciples after they had taken the Passover meal together. When Thomas asked Jesus how they could know the way to the place which was being prepared for them, Jesus responded, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). On the road to Damascus, Paul learned that when one persecuted the Way, he was persecuting Christ (Acts 9:5).

## How can we, like Paul, help others understand that no amount of good deeds or religious achievement can earn salvation?

### VERSE 5

Since Paul had letters from the high priest and Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, the high priest and elders could verify his testimony. They would be able to speak to Paul's Jewish zeal since they had sent him to Damascus armed with letters accrediting him to procure the arrest and extradition of Christians who had fled for refuge in Damascus. His assigned task was to bring followers of the Way back to Jerusalem to receive their deserved punishment.

Paul's speech concerning his Jewish credentials reminds us of his list of all the things he now considered "to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ" (Phil. 3:8; see vv. 5-6). How can we, like Paul, help others understand that no amount of good deeds or religious achievement can earn salvation?

(In PSG, p. 103) **Why would it be important to clearly contrast your life before and after your commitment to Christ as you tell your life story?**

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

### VERSES 6-7

Paul then recounted the event that changed the entire trajectory of his life. He was **approaching Damascus** at **about noon** when **an intense light from**

**heaven** knocked him **to the ground**. The time stamp of noon underlines the brightness of the vision. A divine voice addressed him by his Hebrew name **Saul**. The repetition of the name suggests a somewhat formal setting and a significant address by a deity. For example, when Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac, the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham” (Gen. 22:11). At Beer-sheba, God spoke to Israel in a vision, “Jacob, Jacob” (Gen. 46:2). When the old priest Levi understood that God was calling to Samuel, he sent him back to bed with instructions of how he should respond to the divine messenger. “The LORD came, stood there, and called as before, ‘Samuel, Samuel!’” (1 Sam. 3:10).

The question from the Lord must have thoroughly confused Saul. The Lord wanted to know why Saul was persecuting Him. Saul thought that he was defending God and His laws. How could God accuse Saul of persecuting Him?

#### VERSE 8

Recognizing that this was a heavenly visitation, Paul addressed the one speaking to him as **Lord**, but asked about His identity. If Paul’s question reflected his surprise and confusion, the even more astounding answer would shake and shape Paul to the very core of his being. **“I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.”** It is interesting to note that it is only in this account of the Damascus road event that Paul used the designation “of Nazareth.” This Jesus, who transformed and commissioned Paul, was from the very heart of Jewish homeland.

Jesus’ response to Paul’s question about His identity required Paul to rethink many of his earlier convictions. First, it was now apparent that Jesus was alive and in some manner associated with God the Father. This meant that Paul had to revise his understanding of Jesus’ life and teachings. Second, it meant that Paul’s Jewish zeal, which led him to persecute Christians, was under God’s rebuke. He would have to rethink his former life in Judaism. Third, Paul would also have to rethink his understanding of God’s kingdom. He could no longer see the kingdom as a future expectation, but as a reality already present. Finally, the assertion that Paul was persecuting Christ led to the understanding that there was a clear connection between Christ and His followers. We will encounter these themes throughout the Pauline letters.

#### VERSE 15

After the risen Lord made His identity known, Saul’s second question was the only appropriate response. “What should I do, Lord?” (v. 10). This reminds us of Isaiah’s response after he saw the Lord in the temple (Isa. 6:8). Paul was instructed to go to Damascus, where the Lord would reveal Paul’s assigned responsibility to him. Ananias, a devout man according to the law whose reputation was unimpeachable, restored Paul’s sight in Jesus’ name and told him the mission that was given him by “the God of our ancestors” (v. 14). Ananias’ words to Paul concerning his healing are given in greater detail in 9:17, but the words of commission (22:14-16) are given in greater detail in this retelling. Paul wanted to emphasize that a pious Jew had communicated his commission from the risen Christ to Paul.

#### ACTS 22:8

<sup>8</sup> I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ He said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.’

#### ACTS 20:15

<sup>15</sup> ‘Since you will be a witness for him to all people of what you have seen and heard.

Paul had seen the risen Christ and had heard His voice. Therefore, he knew it was his responsibility to be a witness for Christ **to all people**. The task of telling *all people* is not a novel idea found only in the New Testament. God had blessed Abraham so that “all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3). Throughout the Old Testament narrative, we encounter the emphasis on being a light or blessing to the Gentiles. In this sense, Paul’s commission was consistent with God’s eternal purpose.

## ACTS 22:16

<sup>16</sup> And now, why are you delaying? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

### VERSE 16

The phrase **why are you delaying** refers to Paul’s acceptance of his mission that required he first **be baptized** into the community of believers. Some people have used the next phrase, **and wash away your sins**, as a proof text for baptismal regeneration, the belief that the act of baptism has saving significance. But that concept is supported by neither this text nor any other in the Bible. The overarching term is **calling on his name**. It is the profession of faith in Christ that is the saving act and basis for baptism (see Acts 2:38). Baptism is the outward, visible sign of the inward, spiritual cleansing from sin.

This passage clearly reminds us that no one is beyond the power of the gospel. If one who publicly denounced Jesus and persecuted His church can be saved, we can be confident the gospel is for everyone.

**This passage clearly reminds us that no one is beyond the power of the gospel.**

### NEW PURPOSE (ACTS 22:17-21)

## ACTS 22:17-18

<sup>17</sup> After I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance  
<sup>18</sup> and saw him telling me, ‘Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’

### VERSES 17-18

The event these verses describe occurred three years after Paul’s conversion on his first visit to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-29; Gal. 1:18-19). Paul’s second visionary experience was during a moment of ecstasy while he was worshiping in the temple. This event was not mentioned in Acts 9 but is included here because it helps to show Paul’s regard for the temple. In this instance, Jesus warned Paul to **get out of Jerusalem quickly** because his testimony about Christ would not be accepted. Again, notice a similarity between Paul’s call and Isaiah’s call. Both were told that people would resist their message (see Isa. 6:9-13).

Paul included this story in this context for several distinct reasons. First, it happened in the temple, which indicated that he had high regard for the temple and his Jewish heritage. Second, it put to rest the accusation that Paul was trying to change the Jews by encouraging them to ignore the law of Moses. Third, it illustrated that the God they worshiped had commissioned Paul. Finally, it explained that the Lord had foretold the rejections of Paul’s message.

## VERSES 19-20

You may be surprised to read that Paul protested his orders to leave Jerusalem, but such protests are a common theme of biblical commissioning narratives. Recall Moses' objections when he encountered God at the burning bush (Ex. 3). Moses not only listed his deficiencies, but he also volunteered his brother for the task. Perhaps you have responded to God's urging in the same manner.

The reason Paul gave for not wanting to leave Jerusalem was related to his own testimony. He argued that surely the people in Jerusalem would listen to his message since they were thoroughly acquainted with his former activity as a persecutor of the church. Paul even recounted the occasion when he gave approval for the stoning of Stephen and guarded their clothes during the murder. Paul thought that his testimony concerning his radically changed life would surely make them listen to his message. But they were unwilling. According to Acts 9:30, the leaders of the church escorted Paul to Caesarea and put him on a ship to Tarsus.

## VERSE 21

Paul's instruction was not simply to leave Jerusalem; it was to go **far away to the Gentiles**. Paul's Gentile ministry was directly related to the Jews' refusal to accept his witness to Christ as Messiah. The phrase *far away* is not simply a reference to a destination distant from Jerusalem, it is a reference to people not of the Jewish race. You will find this same phrase in Peter's speech recorded in Acts 2. After calling people to repent and be baptized, Peter declared, "For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). In Ephesians 2:17 Paul wrote, "He came and proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near."

## REJECTION (ACTS 22:22)

### VERSE 22

Up until the mention of the Gentiles, the crowd was listening intently to Paul's persuasive testimony. With the mention of the Gentiles, the coals of indignation blazed into a white hot flame and the crowd wanted to kill him. Luke provided a clear indication of the intensity of the hatred of the crowd, "they were yelling and flinging aside their garments and throwing dust into the air" (v. 23). These were cultural ways of expressing extreme disapproval. Their shouts tell us all we need to know—**"Wipe this person off the earth! He should not be allowed to live!"**

(In PSG, p. 107) **List various responses a person could have when hearing a believer's testimony about accepting the gospel. What does each response reveal about the listener?**

## ACTS 22:19-20

<sup>19</sup> But I said, 'Lord, they know that in synagogue after synagogue I had those who believed in you imprisoned and beaten. <sup>20</sup> 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.'

## ACTS 22:21

<sup>21</sup> He said to me, 'Go, because I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'

## ACTS 22:22

<sup>22</sup> 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!"

1. A citation from Mishnah, Sota ix. 15 in F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 124.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**LIST:** Prior to the session display the words “Life Story.” Encourage one or two volunteers to share what came to their mind when they saw the words.

**GUIDE:** Utilize the following statements: (1) *The stories we tell are always a reflection of what is important to us.* (2) *Our life experiences lead us to be more passionate in telling our stories.* Share statements asking the group to respond by agreeing or disagreeing with the statement. They may show their response by moving to a specified location in the room or signaling using a thumbs up or thumbs down signal. Remind the group that there are no right or wrong answers.

**TRANSITION:** *Today we are going to look at Paul’s life-changing experience as recorded in Acts 22.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**REVIEW:** Using material in Understand the Context (pp. 114–115; PSG, pp. 101-102), **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul’s Missionary Journeys*), and **Pack Item 4** (*Time Line: Acts*), relate the events leading up to the verses to be studied today. Use the time line and map to reinforce where Paul has traveled on his journeys.

**READ:** Invite someone to read Acts 22:3-5, directing the group to listen to determine Paul’s background and his initial response to followers of Christ.

**DRAW:** On a board or poster, draw a cross. On one side of the cross write the words or phrases describing Paul’s actions in these verses. Above the cross write the background information the group gained while listening to these verses.

**DISCUSS:** *Why was it critical that Paul relate his background to his listeners? From the PSG (p. 103): Why would it be important to clearly contrast your life before and after your commitment to Christ as you tell your life story?*

**EXPLAIN:** *Paul’s background provided him with an entry point to share his story. Perhaps there were people in the crowd who knew him when he was persecuting Christians and wondered what led to the change in his life. Paul boldly shared his experience in the hope that many would believe.*

**READ:** Direct someone to read aloud Acts 22:6-8, directing the group to picture in their minds Paul’s life-changing encounter.

**DIRECT:** Reread the verses, asking the group to listen for key details. As details are shared record them on the center of the cross.

**TRANSITION:** *Paul did not stop sharing after his dramatic encounter. He continued to share his first steps of obedience.*

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud Acts 22:15-16, while the group notes Paul’s actions of obedience.

**RECORD:** On the other side of the cross, write the steps of obedience taken by Paul as recorded in verses 15-16.

**ASK:** *How might a person's past be perceived as an obstacle when it comes to accepting Christ? How might other people's opinions add to that obstacle?* (PSG, p. 105)

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud Acts 22:17-21, as the group listens for Paul's new purpose.

**DISCUSS:** Read aloud Matthew 28:18-20. *How was Paul's life purpose tied to Jesus' commission recorded in Matthew 28:18-20? Does the specific purpose given to each believer always relate to that commission? Explain your thinking.* (PSG, p. 106)

**SUMMARIZE:** *Paul felt like the Jews in Jerusalem would see the change in his life and that he would be the perfect one to reach the Jews, but God had different plans.* Reread Acts 22:15 and distribute a copy of **Pack Item 5** (Bookmark: Memory Verses) to each person. Highlight this passage and challenge the group to memorize the verse.

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read Acts 22:22 to discover the response of the crowd.

**RECORD:** Write the word "Rejection" below the cross.

**ASK:** *List various responses a person could have when hearing a believer's testimony about accepting the gospel. What does each response reveal about the listener?* (PSG, p. 107)

**TRANSITION:** *The Jews of Jerusalem failed to see themselves in need of a change, but Paul continued to share that God's salvation was for all people.*

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## **SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)**

**REVIEW:** Using the information recorded on the cross, reinforce the way Paul shared his testimony. Emphasize his former life, his life-changing encounter, and his new purpose. Prior to the session enlist someone in the group to share their testimony of how Christ changed their life or be prepared to share your own testimony.

**DIRECT:** Lead the group to examine the inside front cover of the PSG and reflect on their own response to Christ's offer of salvation.

**RESPOND:** Call attention to the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 108): *If you are a believer, write your salvation story following the headings: (1) former life, (2) life-changing encounter, and (3) new purpose. With whom can you share your salvation story? Memorize Acts 22:15.* Then repeat Acts 22:15 together, challenging the group again to memorize the verse.

**PRAY:** Close in prayer, asking for the convicting power of the Holy Spirit to lead the individuals in the group to accept Christ's offer of salvation or be empowered to share more boldly the testimony of how Christ has changed their lives.



## PRACTICE

- Early in the week contact the group, encouraging them to share their life story during the week.
- Contact anyone absent from the last group session. Include a personal invitation to attend Bible study next week.
- Pray for each member of the group to come to know Christ or to grow in Christ.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an alternate idea to introduce the session, display a picture of a before and after change, such as a weight loss, storm damage, or a baby picture with the same person pictured as an adult. Reinforce the idea that life changes impact who we are and how we are perceived by others and how we view ourselves.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance the reading of Paul's testimony, prior to the session enlist an individual to stand before the group as Paul and read Acts 22:3-8,15-22 to begin the Explore the Text section of the session.
- For further insight into Acts 22:17-21, guide the group to complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 107): *The Book of Acts includes the story of Paul's conversion three times. Compare and contrast Acts 9:1-19, 22:6-16; and 26:12-18. What unique details are emphasized in each account? How do you think the specific audience impacted the way Paul told his story?*

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Direct attention to and lead the group to reflect on the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 108): *Review the information on the inside front cover and reflect on your response to Christ's offer of salvation. Have you accepted His offer of salvation through faith in Him? If not, what keeps you from taking that step? If you have, what next steps can you take to share your testimony with those who have not believed?*

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play the song, and distribute the lyrics for "Testify," by Shai Linne, as the group gathers to begin the session, or use the three verses with the chorus at different times during the session.

# ANSWERING CRITICS

The gospel demands a response of repentance and faith.

## ACTS 26:19-29

### MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 26:20

- **READ** Acts 23:23–26:32, First Thoughts (p. 124), and Understand the Context (pp. 124–125). Take note of the three trials Paul faced and the specific charges he faced.
- **STUDY** Acts 26:19-29, using Explore the Text on pages 125–129. Consider Paul’s message, how he delivered the message, and the opportunities he provided for response. Utilize the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* for more information on repentance. Reflect on how repentance and faith are connected. For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 130–131), More Ideas (p. 132), ideas included in *QuickSource*, and ideas online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras) to customize the plans according to the needs of your group. Consider ways to get everyone in the group involved in the study.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog ([LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry](http://LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides. Prepare to display the following Pack Item:  **PACK ITEM 8** (*Chart: Paul’s Recorded Sermons*). For More Ideas, gather:  Note cards and pencils.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Evangelism and Missions*

It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Observe when and for what purpose a New Testament passage includes an Old Testament quotation.*

Jesus told the disciples of the things written about Him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44-49). Peter and Paul pointed to the Old Testament in their presentation of the gospel. Review Peter's message in Acts 2:14-36 and Paul's message in Acts 13:32-41. List the Old Testament passages used in both sermons. How do these passages establish that Jesus was the promised Messiah and fortify the credibility of the church's witness?

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

Job offers and marriage proposals, among other things, can be tricky. Both usually require a quick response. Some people are prepared for the offer or proposal, having followed clues along the way. Others are completely caught off guard, unprepared to make an on-the-spot, life-altering decision.

(In PSG, p. 109) **List times in your life when you were required to make a quick decision. Were you prepared for that moment? If so, how?**

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# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## Acts 23:23–26:32

Last week we left Paul with a mob in Jerusalem trying to take his life (Acts 22:22). As the crowd prepared to beat Paul, he asked the centurion if it was legal for an uncondemned Roman citizen to be scourged. Learning of Paul's Roman citizenship, the commander was alarmed and asked the chief priests and Sanhedrin to convene to resolve the issue (22:23–23:5).

When Paul noticed that the Sanhedrin was made up of Pharisees and Sadducees, he declared that he was being judged because of the hope of the resurrection. Since the two groups had differing opinions on this topic, they began to shout at one another and the commander had to take Paul back to the barracks (23:6-10).

A group of forty men determined they would kill Paul. They asked the chief priests and elders to bring Paul back before them with the sole intention of ambushing him on the way (23:12-15).

Paul's nephew discovered the plot and brought the news to Paul. Paul, in turn, sent his nephew to the commander. The commander acted quickly to protect the Roman citizen he had in custody, sending Paul under guard to Caesarea. He sent Paul to the governor Felix with a letter explaining the events that had prompted him to send the prisoner. Paul was kept in Herod's palace until his accusers could arrive (23:16-35).

Ananias the high priest arrived, accompanied by the elders and their lawyer Tertullus. They accused Paul of being an agitator among the Jews and Romans, a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes, and one who desecrated the temple (24:1-9).

In his defense, Paul indicated that his accusers had provided no evidence to substantiate their claims. He then explained his commitment to "the Way," arguing that as part of "the Way" he worshiped his father's God and believed all everything written in the Law and in the Prophets (24:10-21).

Felix was familiar with "the Way" and thus postponed his verdict until Lysias the commander could be present. Paul was under arrest, but was

given limited freedom, which allowed his friends to serve him. Felix came with his wife Drusilla to hear Paul speak on the subject of faith in Christ Jesus. Paul's message frightened Felix, and he dismissed Paul with a promise to call for him later. We have no evidence that he did so. Paul's imprisonment continued for two years until Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus (24:22-27).

Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, where the chief priests asked him to send Paul back to Jerusalem (they were planning an ambush), but Festus told them to send Paul's accusers to Caesarea instead. Paul's accusers brought many serious charges but again they offered no proof. Paul adequately refuted the charges. However, Festus, wanting to placate the Jews, asked Paul if he would go to Jerusalem to face charges. Paul was aware that their plans to kill him had not changed, and he immediately appealed to Caesar, paving the way for a trip to Rome (25:1-12).

A few days later, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived in Caesarea to visit Festus. Festus described Paul's case to Agrippa, admitting that he saw the issue as nothing more than disagreements about their own religion and a certain Jesus, a dead man whom Paul believed to be alive. This piqued Agrippa's curiosity, and he requested that he might hear Paul. Festus was delighted to grant his request because he admitted that since Paul had done nothing deserving death, he had nothing concrete to write to the Emperor about Paul (25:13-27).

Paul began his defense before Agrippa with words of praise for the king, calling him an expert in Jewish customs and controversies (26:3). Paul recounted the story of his upbringing in Jerusalem and his training as a Pharisee. Paul then addressed the issue of the hope of the resurrection, which was based on the promise God made to their forefathers. Then Paul questioned why anyone would find it incredible to believe that God raises the dead. He turned next to his zeal as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus the Nazarene. The crux of Paul's testimony was the Damascus road experience that changed the trajectory of his life. In this instance, Paul provided more detail concerning his commission from the risen Lord, paying special attention to his ministry to the Gentiles (26:4-18).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### THE GOSPEL TOLD (ACTS 26:19-23)

#### VERSES 19-20

From the moment of *the heavenly vision*, Paul had but one Master. Therefore, to receive a commission from Him was to obey it. Paul thus informed **•Agrippa** that his actions were based on orders from the risen Christ. When we look at all three conversion narratives in Acts, we find that the emphasis in each is on the commission the risen Christ gave to Paul. Paul's life after Damascus was dictated by his desire to obey the call to be a servant and witness (26:16).

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Agrippa II," available digitally in the Winter 2017-2018 *Biblical Illustrator for Explore the Bible* at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

### ACTS 26:19-20

<sup>19</sup> "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

Paul **preached to those in Damascus first**, then **to those in Jerusalem**, and finally **in all the region of Judea, and to the Gentiles**. You may have noticed that Paul's preaching was nearly a personal fulfillment of the Acts 1:8 commission, as he began his ministry in his Jerusalem and then expanded outward. Luke mentioned Paul's preaching in Damascus (9:20-25) and Jerusalem (9:28), but he did not write of a mission to Judea. A preaching ministry in Judea would seem to conflict with the statement in Galatians that he "remained personally unknown to the Judean churches" (Gal. 1:22) However, in that text Paul mentioned that churches in Judea had heard about his ministry and had praised God for it (v. 24). Paul's testimony before Agrippa confirmed his missionary strategy of beginning in synagogues with the Jews before witnessing to the Gentiles.

In every circumstance and to every audience, Paul's message was the same—all people must **repent and turn to God**, leading to **works worthy of repentance**. The apostle never missed an opportunity to declare the gospel, no matter the setting. Here, he was not simply explaining his message in his personal defense; he was declaring the gospel to his present audience, King Agrippa.

Repentance requires that a person turn from self and sin to God. The manifestation of true repentance will be a life marked by good works. This emphasis reminds us of John the Baptist's warning that people must produce fruit consistent with repentance (Luke 3:7-8). Paul rejected good works as a means of salvation, but insisted works would be the natural consequence of salvation.

## ACTS 26:21

<sup>21</sup> For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and were trying to kill me.

### VERSE 21

Paul's preaching prompted the Jews to seize him in the temple and try to put him to death. You may recall that the riot started when Jews from Asia accused Paul of taking a Gentile into the temple complex (21:27-29). Nonetheless, it was Paul's preaching of Christ and the need to repent that stirred the Jews hostility and suspicion until they were willing to accuse Paul without evidence. Thus, anyone wanting to judge Paul would have to take into account the validity of the message.

## ACTS 26:22

<sup>22</sup> 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—

### VERSE 22

Paul's powerful preaching that had so upset the Jews was based on **help from God**. That help was clearly proven as God kept His promise to rescue Paul (26:17). Even though Paul had been in bonds, his witness was unfettered. The reference to **both small and great** was likely a reference to social barriers. He had preached to ordinary people, high priests, governors, and the Jewish king himself. Paul's many trials had only served to provide multiple opportunities for him to preach the gospel. That message contained **nothing other than what the prophets and Moses said would take place**. It is entirely likely that Paul may have listed Old Testament passages that had been fulfilled in Christ. This form of preaching actually began with Christ (Luke 24:44-49) and Peter's message demonstrated it in Acts 2.

### VERSE 23

Paul affirmed that Moses and the prophets had indicated **that the Messiah must suffer**, that He would **rise from the dead**, and He would **proclaim light** to the Jews and Gentiles. The phrase *must suffer* indicates that this was God's eternal will revealed through His prophets. In the Old Testament it is Isaiah's servant songs (such as Isa. 52–53) and the Messianic psalms (such as Ps. 22) that most clearly point to Christ's suffering. The message of a suffering Messiah and a resurrected Lord are distinctive hallmarks of early Christian teaching. Paul, as Christ's servant and messenger, was merely an instrument through which Christ fulfilled His ministry as a light to both His own people and the Gentiles.

The Scripture is powerful unto salvation. Each time we have the opportunity to talk to others about our faith, we should be prepared to point them to the Scriptures.

(In PSG, p. 113) **Why is it important to point to Scripture when sharing the gospel? To what verses might a person point?**

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**Each time we have the opportunity to talk to others about our faith, we should be prepared to point them to the Scriptures.**

### OBJECTION REBUFFED (ACTS 26:24-26)

#### VERSES 24-25

When Festus could no longer endure Paul's testimony about the resurrection, he interrupted him **in a loud voice**. He affirmed that Paul was a man of **much study** but concluded that his study had driven him **mad**. Surely no sensible Roman could believe in the resurrection of a dead man. Festus concluded that no sane man would antagonize his countrymen for such an unlikely and unbelievable doctrine.

For Paul, however, his message was **truth and good judgment**. Paul had no desire to alienate Festus, and thus he addressed him as **most excellent Festus**. He affirmed to Festus that his words were anything but madness; they were true and reasonable when one took into account that Paul had been commissioned by the One who had been raised from the dead.

#### VERSE 26

King Agrippa had requested this audience with Paul; therefore Paul turned his attention once more to him. Paul could address the king boldly because he knew that none of the recent events had escaped the king's notice. The life and ministry of Jesus was a matter of common knowledge, and His resurrection was well-documented and attested to by many witnesses. Further, this

### ACTS 26:23

<sup>23</sup> 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."

### ACTS 26:24-26

<sup>24</sup> 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."<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup> 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.

message had been declared openly and not in some corner. The Way was no secret society, hiding its message from the public. Followers of Christ boldly declared that Jesus was the Messiah who fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. He had suffered, died, and had risen from the dead.

**Believers must be prepared to respond to objections with love and directness. What can we do to be better prepared to answer those who object to our message?**

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### Profile of King Agrippa II (In PSG, p. 114)

- *Great-grandson of Herod the Great, who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth (Matt. 2:1)*
- *Son of Herod Agrippa I, who beheaded James and imprisoned Peter (Acts 12:1-3)*
- *Ruler over northeast parts of Palestine, including Caesarea Philippi*
- *Rumored to have been in an incestuous relationship with his sister, Bernice*
- *Granted by Rome custody of the ceremonial vestments worn by the high priest on the Day of Atonement and the authority to appoint the high priest; as such, was considered "king of the Jews"*
- *An expert in "Jewish customs and controversies" (Acts 26:3)*
- *Last of the Herodian rulers*

#### ACTS 26:27

<sup>27</sup> King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you believe."

#### INVITATION GIVEN (ACTS 26:27-29)

##### VERSE 27

Paul sought to resume his argument from the point where Festus interrupted him. He turned to Agrippa and asked him if he believed in the message of the prophets. Before the king could respond, Paul answered in the affirmative for him—***I know you believe.*** Agrippa had sufficient Old Testament knowledge to give corroborating testimony and assure Festus that Paul's arguments based on prophecy were well-founded. But Paul had more in mind than simply establishing his innocence. He wanted to convince Agrippa so that he too would have a personal relationship with Christ.

##### VERSE 28

Interpreters differ on how we should understand Agrippa's response. Some understand the meaning to be as reflected in the King James Version, "Almost thou persuadest me," which seems to express an interest and desire that left Agrippa just short of a decision. But others understand the meaning to be as reflected by the Christian Standard Bible ***"Are you going***

#### ACTS 26:28

<sup>28</sup> Agrippa said to Paul, "Are you going to persuade me to become a Christian so easily?"

***to persuade me to become a Christian so easily?***” In this case, Agrippa was suggesting Paul was naïve to think that he could be persuaded in such a brief time by so simple an argument.

#### VERSE 29

While we are incapable of knowing for certain what went through Agrippa’s mind at this moment, we can be certain of Paul’s desire for the king and others listening to Paul to come to know Christ as their personal Savior.

Thus, in his final appeal, Paul affirmed that he could only pray that all those who heard his voice would know Christ as he did. The phrase, ***whether easily or with difficulty*** is probably best understood as “with a few words or a lengthy discourse.” Paul’s singular passion throughout his multiple appearances before authorities was that all who heard him would become a Christian as he had done. Paul saw every circumstance as an opportunity to present the gospel. He knew God was His ultimate judge and that He was in ultimate control.

### Paul saw every circumstance as an opportunity to present the gospel.

Paul may have finished with a reference to his chains as a way of lightening up a tense moment. We can imagine that Paul may have raised his shackled hands and smiled as he said ***except for these chains***.

We have no evidence that Agrippa made a decision for Christ on this occasion. In verses 30-32 we read that when the group left Paul, they conversed about his story, agreeing that he had done nothing that deserved death or chains. You can hear a bit of remorse in Agrippa’s voice as he said to Festus, “This man could have been released if he had not appealed to Caesar” (v. 32). They believed that Paul’s situation was sad because he was in physical chains. The truth was that their bondage to sin was an imprisonment much worse than Paul’s.

**It may seem a bit strange that Paul would extend an invitation for response at his own hearing, but everyone who hears the gospel must be given the opportunity to make a decision about Jesus. Can you think of ways you can give people the opportunity to respond even in unusual circumstances?**

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#### ACTS 26:29

<sup>29</sup> “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.”

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**INTRODUCE:** As the group arrives, encourage them to think of a time when they had to make a quick decision that had life-altering implications. Present a summary of the paragraph on page 109 of the PSG.

**ASK:** *List times in your life when you were required to make a quick decision. Were you prepared for that moment? If so, how?* (PSG, p. 109)

**TRANSITION:** *Today we see that Paul was always ready to give a defense for the gospel and that he did not fear asking for a response from his hearers.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**MINI-LECTURE:** Using Understand the Context (pp. 124–125; PSG, pp. 110–111) provide information about the charges that Paul faced in Caesarea, the background, the time frame, and the setting for Acts 26:19–29. Display **Pack Item 8** (*Chart: Paul's Recorded Sermons*) to support the mini-lecture. Remind the group of the previous session and read Acts: 26:1–18 to lead into further examination of Acts 26:19–29.

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud Acts 26:19–23, while the group notes Paul's defense against the charges and his message for his listeners.

**STATE:** *Paul approached his new purpose of sharing Christ with the same zeal he previously used to persecute believers.*

**EXAMINE:** Lead the group to review Acts 26:19–20 to see why Paul shared the gospel where he did and the specifics of his message.

**ASK:** *Why does Paul appear to say that repentance and turning to God is one action? How did he use his own life as an example of repentance and a change in behavior?*

**DISCUSS:** *How would you define repentance?* (Search the Internet, using the phrase “Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary repentance” for further insight.)

**DIRECT:** Lead individuals in the group to paraphrase their own definitions of *repentance* and share with one other person in the group. Ask: *Why does Paul talk about repentance connected with works? How are repentance and faith connected?*

**EXPLAIN:** *No one secures his or her salvation through works, but works are a natural response to repentance.* Read Ephesians 2:8–10.

**DIRECT:** Encourage the group to reread verses 21–23 to see how Paul referenced the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy. Direct the group to examine the commentary on Verses 22–23 on pages 112–113 of the PSG.

**ASK:** Why is it important to point to Scripture when sharing the gospel? To what verses might a person point? (PSG, p. 113) Why were a suffering Messiah and the resurrection so difficult for many Jews to accept?

**DISCUSS:** Paul pointed to Scripture in his defense before King Agrippa. How would you explain Paul's assertion about nothing being a secret in verse 26? From the PSG (p. 114): How do people try to discredit the gospel message? What actions could a person take to prepare to address potential objections to the gospel?

**TRANSITION:** Paul's defense called for a response, and his first response came from Festus.

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud Acts 26:24-26, while the group listens for Festus's response.

**STATE:** The thought of a resurrection was too much for Festus. Paul remained respectful of Festus, but he did not change his message.

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read Acts 26:27-29 as the group listens to discover what happens when Paul turned his attention to King Agrippa.

**DISCUSS:** What roadblock might a person encounter when trying to give another person the opportunity to respond to the gospel? How do those roadblocks compare to what Paul faced? (PSG, p. 116)

**TRANSITION:** Paul stayed firm in his convictions and ardently shared the gospel despite remaining in prison. Even Agrippa recognized that the charges against Paul were false and would have recommended his release had Paul not already appealed to Caesar.

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**DIRECT:** Lead the group to examine the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 117). Ask individuals in the group to turn to a neighbor (or form a group of three or four) and share ways they have followed these principles.

**DEBRIEF:** After the pair or smaller groups share, lead the group to record actions that would support the principles identified by the group.

**EVALUATE:** Reconvene the smaller groups to work together to answer the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 117): *Reflect on Acts 26:20. How can you use this verse to help you prepare to share the gospel with someone? What other verses might you use? With whom can you share your gospel appeal?*

**STATE:** Sometimes we may share the gospel but stop before offering an invitation. Paul made sure that Agrippa heard the invitation that was open to him. Paul's desire was for all to know Christ. Our desire should be the same.

**PRAY:** Thank God for the privilege of sharing Christ. Pray for boldness in offering invitations to accept the gospel.



## PRACTICE

- Contact those not present, asking them to share prayer concerns. Use this opportunity to encourage them in their spiritual lives.
- Send a reminder to all the group to highlight the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 115) and encourage them in their spiritual conversations this week.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an alternate idea to focus attention, reference a stoplight and ask how many people have had to make a quick response to a changing light, either to stop or to accelerate. Share: *Throughout life we are faced with the need to make decisions. Running a red light could have life-altering implications, while stopping too suddenly might lead to being hit from behind. Our response to the gospel is equally life altering. In today's study Paul declared the gospel as he defended himself before Festus and Agrippa. He didn't stop without providing them the opportunity to respond.*

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the teaching of Acts 26:19-29, create three teams with each team being assigned one of the following people in the verses: Paul, Festus, or King Agrippa. Ask each team to focus specifically on their assigned person as the verses are examined and discussed.
- For further study of Acts 26:19-20, read and discuss how the following Scriptures support Paul's defense: Luke 24:26; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23; Colossians 1:18; and Revelation 1:5.
- After the discussion of the verses, distribute note cards and pencils to each team. Direct them to imagine that their assigned person is writing a journal entry at the end of the day. Ask each of the teams to construct a journal entry beginning with the prompt, *Today I ...*. Encourage the use of some of the specific words from the text studied. Call for each team to share their entry as a summary for the study.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Direct attention to and lead the group to reflect on the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 117): *Record the name of someone you have talked with about spiritual things but did not give an opportunity to respond to the gospel. How can you give the opportunity to that person? What questions might open the door for that conversation?*

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

To close the session lead the group to sing or read the lyrics of "I Am Resolved," by Palmer Hartsough and James H. Fillmore, focusing on the fourth verse.

# ALWAYS ON MISSION

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

## ACTS 28:17-28

### MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 28:31

- **READ** Acts 27:1–28:31, First Thoughts (p. 134), and Understand the Context (pp. 134–135). Take note of the specific hardships Paul faced on the journey and the evidence of God’s power and provision in these verses. Consider how you will use the Pack Items to support understanding of the context.
- **STUDY** Acts 28:17-28, using Explore the Text on pages 135–139. Understand what the phrase *hope of Israel* means. Reflect on how God uses a variety of things to make it possible for a person to hear the gospel. Examine the additional Scriptures mentioned and complete the Bible Skill activity in the PSG (p. 125). For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).
- **PLAN** the group time using suggestions under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 140–141). Also refer to *QuickSource* and [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras) for other ideas. Look for ways to creatively call attention to this session’s memory verse (Acts 28:31).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides;  A whiteboard and markers. Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul’s Missionary Journeys*);  **PACK ITEM 4** (*Time Line: Acts*); and  **PACK ITEM 9** (*Poster: Difficulties Faced by Early Missionaries*).



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Evangelism and Missions*

Missionary effort rests upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life, and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Observe when and for what purpose a New Testament passage includes an Old Testament quotation.*

Paul quoted Isaiah 6 to encourage his audience to believe the gospel message and to help them understand why the message must also go to the Gentiles. Review these other places in the New Testament where Isaiah 6 is quoted: Matthew 13:13-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; and John 12:39-40. How is the passage used in these different passages? What factors are the same and what are different in each case?

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

Some people, with the right training, become excellent salespeople. Others are naturals at endorsing a particular product because they use the product or because their life has been changed as a result of that product. Happy customers will eagerly tell anyone and everyone about a product they love; they just can't resist.

(In PSG, p. 118) **What kinds of products have others tried to encourage you to use because they found them to work for them? What makes their testimony more effective than a professional salesperson pitching the same product?**

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We have spent nearly three months together following Paul's ministry. We have followed him on three missionary journeys and we have listened to him explain his conversion and calling on several occasions. We have been with him in prison, watched as he was first hailed as a god and then stoned and left for dead. We have watched as he has had to flee from several towns. Finally, we have observed him as he faced trumped up charges and threats on his life. In this lesson, we will leave him in prison in Rome awaiting trial before Caesar. The thread that connects all these events is that Paul saw every event and circumstance as an opportunity to share the gospel.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ACTS 27:1–28:31

We pick up the story this week with Paul on his way to Rome. Paul was handed over to a centurion named Julius of the Imperial Regiment who treated Paul kindly and allowed Paul's friends to minister to him. He put Paul on an Alexandrian ship headed for Italy. The journey from the outset was fraught with difficulty, and after some time had passed Paul warned them that he saw that this voyage was headed toward damage and heavy loss of cargo and lives. But the centurion listened to the captain and owner instead of Paul and continued the voyage (27:1-11).

They were momentarily fooled by a gentle south wind and set sail along the shore of Crete. Not long after setting sail, a northeaster drove the ship along helplessly before it. The ship was so severely battered that the crew began to jettison the cargo and the ship's gear. The storm raged on for many days and they had nearly lost all hope that anyone could be saved. Paul encouraged the crew and passengers to take courage since there would be no loss of life. He related that an angel had told him that he need not fear because it was necessary for him to stand before Caesar (27:12-26).

After fourteen days they were drifting in the Adriatic Sea and approaching land during the night. Paul told them to eat, since many had been going without food for days. He took some bread, gave thanks to God, and began to eat. This encouraged the crew, and they took food themselves. Once they had eaten they threw the remainder of the grain overboard to lighten the ship (27:27-38).

When daylight came, they sighted land and planned to run the ship aground. They struck a sand bar; the bow was immovable and the strong waves broke apart the stern. The soldiers were ready to kill the prisoners to keep them from escaping, but the centurion intervened because he wanted to save Paul. They landed in Malta and were shown extraordinary hospitality. Paul was gathering wood for a fire when a viper fastened itself to his hand. The people assumed he was being punished for a crime until they noticed he suffered no harm. They then changed their minds and said he was a god. Publius, who owned an estate, took them in for three days, and Paul healed his father and others on the island (27:39–28:10).

After three months they continued their journey to Rome on another Alexandrian ship that had wintered in Malta. The ship landed at Puteoli [pyoo TEE oh ligh], where they found believers who invited them to stay with them for seven days. Thus Paul came to Rome. Believers from Rome came to meet Paul and greatly encouraged him. Roman officials put Paul under house arrest with the soldier who guarded him. What is most fascinating about this tumultuous journey to a Roman prison is that Paul saw it as an opportunity to be on mission for Christ.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### THE JOURNEY (ACTS 28:17-20)

#### VERSES 17-18

The stark simplicity of statement “and so we came to Rome” (v. 14) is fascinating when one considers what had transpired leading up to that moment. Paul had long desired to visit Rome so that he could encourage the believers, be encouraged by them, preach the gospel, and secure the help of the Roman churches for his mission to Spain (see Rom. 1:10-12,15; 15:23-24). In the process of reaching Rome, he had been arrested, imprisoned, and ship-wrecked. His arrival at long last was not as originally planned—he was a prisoner in chains—but his mission and determination remained steadfast. Paul’s desire to stand before Caesar had little to do with his personal freedom. He knew that his case could lead to legal recognition for Christianity. Further, it is clear that he desired to declare the gospel to Caesar.

Upon arrival, Paul remained true to his missionary pattern of preaching first to the Jews and afterwards to the Gentiles. After he had been in Rome for only three days, **he called together the leaders of the Jews**. Paul normally would visit local synagogues, but in this case they would need to

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Parallel Between Pisan Antioch and Roman Jews” in the Winter 2017-2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

### ACTS 28:17-18

<sup>17</sup> 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.  
<sup>18</sup> After they examined me, they wanted to release me, since there was no reason for the death penalty in my case.

## ACTS 28:19

<sup>19</sup> Because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar; even though I had no charge to bring against my people.

## ACTS 28:20

<sup>20</sup> 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."

## ACTS 28:21

<sup>21</sup> 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.

come to him. From the moment Paul had become a follower of Christ, some of the Jews had been trying to kill him, yet his passion was still to see his countrymen come to know Christ as their Messiah (see Rom. 9:1-5).

Paul appealed to them as **brothers** as he declared that he had done **nothing against** the Jews or the **customs** of the **ancestors**. His simple statement that he was **delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans** did not contain any mention of or condemnation of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. The Roman authorities desired to set Paul free because they found that he was guilty of no crime deserving the death penalty.

### VERSE 19

The Jews **objected** to the conclusion of the Roman leaders who wanted to release him, and that left Paul with no other option than to **appeal to Caesar**. This brief summary statement on a lengthy ordeal ends with Paul's affirmation that he had no accusation against his own nation. Paul was acutely aware that God was at work in all these circumstances to allow Paul to stand before Caesar, and thus Paul neither needed not desired to place blame at anyone's feet.

### VERSE 20

Paul now explained why he requested an audience with the Jewish leaders. The real reason Paul was wearing chains in a Roman prison had to do with **the hope of Israel**. Paul now established a link that he and his audience had in common. The *hope of Israel* was the expectation of the Messiah's coming. Paul was convinced that Jesus of Nazareth, who had commissioned him, was the promised Messiah and had thus fulfilled the hope of Israel. For that reason, the Christian message did not undermine the religion of Israel but was in truth its ultimate fulfillment.

The circumstances by which Paul had an opportunity to meet with Jewish leaders in Rome was a bit unusual; nevertheless, Paul saw it as a missionary opportunity.

**Have you ever found yourself in an unexpected missionary opportunity? What can we do to sensitize ourselves to these unexpected mission moments?**

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## THE SEEKERS (ACTS 28:21-24)

### VERSE 21

The Jewish leaders' response to Paul was diplomatic and a bit surprising. They denied having any information about Paul's case. They had received no letters from Judea and none of the brothers had come to report anything evil about Paul. It clearly seems that these men did not want to get involved

in Paul's case. They did not want to be associated with the prosecution of a Roman citizen who had received a favorable hearing from men like Festus and Agrippa. Further, no one in Jerusalem had requested they get involved. Paul would be tried by Caesar, and thus the less the Jewish officials knew the better.

#### VERSE 22

After denying having any direct knowledge of Paul's case, they indicated they would like to hear from him about **this sect**. They admitted knowing of it because **people everywhere** were **speaking against** it.

The Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome in A.D. 49 or 50 because of riots prompted by the preaching of Christ. Many of those who were expelled returned after the death of Claudius in A.D. 54. Paul wrote his letter to the Roman church around A.D. 57, and it clearly reflects the presence of vital churches throughout Rome (see Rom. 16). It was now A.D. 61, and we can surmise that the church had continued to grow, which prompted the **sect** of Christianity to receive a negative assessment from the Jewish and Roman communities.

#### VERSE 23

They set a day for a second meeting with Paul to hear about the Christian sect. This meeting was well-attended and lasted **from dawn to dusk**. Luke indicated that Paul **expounded and testified** and **tried to persuade them about Jesus**. For Paul, this was no casual discussion about Christianity, it was a golden opportunity to see his countrymen come to have a personal relationship with the Messiah. We can surmise, based on the length of the meeting, that it was more of a debate than a sermon or monologue.

Luke indicated that Paul expounded on **the kingdom of God** and attempted to persuade them concerning Jesus **from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets**. Luke provided no summary of Paul's lengthy argument, but we can be fairly certain it would have followed a pattern similar to his earlier speeches that we have already studied. Paul affirmed that God's kingdom was not simply a future promise, but it had already invaded the earth through the coming of Jesus. His text for demonstrating that Jesus was the Messiah and thus the necessary fulfillment of Israel's hope was virtually the entire Old Testament interpreted through the lens of the coming of Christ, His death, and resurrection (see Rom. 1:2-4).

#### VERSE 24

**Some were persuaded** by what Paul said. Sadly, others **did not believe**. The bulk of the Jewish community in Rome continued to oppose the Christian sect. This provides another example of the rejection of the gospel by God's own people. The gospel is the power of God for salvation (see Rom. 1:16). It was offered to Jews first and then to Greeks, but every individual must receive it by faith. This encounter demonstrates that we must share the gospel with everyone, particularly those who seek to know more.

#### ACTS 28:22

<sup>22</sup> But we want to hear what your views are, since we know that people everywhere are speaking against this sect.”

#### ACTS 28:23

<sup>23</sup> 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.

#### ACTS 28:24

<sup>24</sup> Some were persuaded by what he said, but others did not believe.

(In PSG, p. 123) **What makes the gospel message so intriguing and interesting? How does that intrigue open the door to share the gospel with others?**

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### Responses to the Gospel in Acts 13–28 (In PSG, p. 123)

- *opposition* (13:8,50; 14:19; 16:22-24)
- *insult* (13:45)
- *rioting* (17:5; 19:23-41; 21:27-36; 22:22-29)
- *division* (14:4; 19:9; 28:24)
- *argument* (17:18)
- *curiosity* (17:20)
- *ridicule* (17:32)
- *interest* (17:32)
- *belief* (13:12; 14:1; 16:31-34; 17:4,34; 19:17-20)
- *joy* (13:48)

#### ACTS 28:25-27

<sup>25</sup> 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 <sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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.

#### THE RESPONSE (ACTS 28:25-28)

##### VERSES 25-27

When Paul indicated that the Jews’ rejection of Christ fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy, a disagreement arose among the Jewish leaders. These leaders would have been more upset by the inclusion of Gentiles in the promises of God (v. 28) than by anything else Paul had declared. It is sad to see how hard it is to overcome prejudice.

Paul affirmed the inspiration and integrity of the Scriptures. It was **the Holy Spirit** who spoke through **the prophet Isaiah**. After Isaiah’s vision in the temple, God commissioned him to speak to his own people. However, God warned Isaiah that his listeners would reject his message, and this rejection would bring judgment upon the people. The ministry of the prophet would cause people to listen but not understand and to look but not see (Isa. 6:9-10).

Jesus spoke these same words from the Old Testament prophet, recorded by all four Gospel writers, to warn the Jews concerning their unbelief. For example, in Matthew 13 we find Jesus teaching by the Sea of Galilee. He spoke many parables, including the story of the sower and the seed. When the disciples asked Jesus why he spoke in parables, He explained that he did so because some who could see would not see and some who could hear would not hear. He then affirmed that those who would not see or hear would fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah. Jesus then cited these same verses from Isaiah.

Isaiah prophesied that the Israelites would not understand or perceive because their **hearts** had **grown callous**. God's desire was that they be converted and healed, but for that to occur listeners had to respond. It was the spiritual ineptitude of God's people that prevented them from hearing and seeing the truth and thus accepting Jesus as God's Messiah. If Paul's present hearers would see and understand with their hearts and return to God, then God would heal them. You could read all of Romans 9–11 to understand Paul's passion for his countrymen and the dilemma they faced because of their own stubborn unbelief. A poignant verse concerning God's love and patience with His own people is found in Romans 10:21, "But to Israel he says, All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and defiant people."

## Like Paul, our task is to be faithful witnesses to all people, regardless of their response.

### VERSE 28

It is likely that Paul's final statement to the Jewish leaders was the most offensive. Verse 29 is not included in many early manuscripts, but it probably contains an accurate assessment of how this meeting ended—they engaged in a prolonged debate among themselves. Paul's message here was no different than the one he delivered in Pisidian Antioch (13:46) or in Corinth (18:6), but in this case there seems to be a solemn finality. Because the Jews rejected the gospel, the salvation of God was **sent to the Gentiles; they will listen**. In Romans 11 Paul indicated that the Jews' rejection of Jesus allowed the gospel to come to the Gentiles. Further, he held out the hope that the salvation of Gentiles would make the Jews jealous and prompt them to be saved. God's desire was to show mercy to all (see Rom. 11:32).

Luke ended the Book of Acts with Paul still in prison. Paul spent two years in rented quarters and was able to welcome all who came to him (v. 30). The authorities in Rome must have been aware of what Paul was doing, and thus we can conclude that many in Rome no longer viewed the gospel as subversive propaganda, or else they would have stopped it. For that reason, Luke noted that Paul's message was "without hindrance" (v. 31). Paul's message was consistent throughout his ministry as he declared the kingdom of God and taught about Jesus.

Luke's story of Jesus' continuing work through His church began in Jerusalem and concluded in Rome with the prospect of Spain ahead. The message that the risen Lord had taught before his ascension concerned the kingdom of God, and Paul's message in a Roman prison was still about the kingdom of God (v. 31).

Clearly, Paul was one of the greatest missionaries of all time, yet many people failed to believe his message. Like Paul, our task is to be faithful witnesses to all people, regardless of their responses.

### ACTS 28:28

<sup>28</sup> Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**INTRODUCE:** Prior to the session write the following phrases on a whiteboard or poster paper: “Guaranteed for life,” “Too good to be true,” “Guaranteed or your money back,” “I’ve heard that before,” and “It’s life changing.” Ask the group when they have heard these phrases, or something similar, and discuss what the phrases might have in common.

**EXPLAIN:** *Paul knew that he had something that was life changing to share, and he used every opportunity to let people know how Christ had changed him. He knew it wasn’t too good to be true, and it guaranteed eternal life.*

**REVIEW:** Using the Understand the Context (PSG, pp. 119–120), **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul’s Missionary Journeys*), and **Pack Item 4** (*Time Line: Acts*), note how much ground Paul covered on his missionary journeys in the time table identified on the time line. Then say: *As we study Acts 28:17-28, look for words or phrases that point to Paul’s determination to share the gospel. Look for other characteristics of Paul as we study this passage.* (adapted from PSG, p. 120)

**TRANSITION:** *Today’s session focuses on Paul’s journey to Rome and his faithful sharing of the gospel, even in chains.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**GUIDE:** Use **Pack Item 9** (*Poster: Difficulties Faced by Early Missionaries*) to summarize Paul’s journey to Rome and the difficulties he faced. The hardships faced by Paul on his journey to Rome emphasize God’s presence and power on the journey.

**TRANSITION:** *Paul arrived safely in Rome as a prisoner, but he was permitted to stay by himself with the soldier who guarded him.*

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud Acts 28:17-20, while the group listens to determine who initiated the meeting, who came to the meeting, and how Paul explained his presence in Rome.

**DISCUSS:** *Who initiated the meeting and why? How did Paul connect with his audience? Why would Paul say he was wearing chains for the hope of Israel?*

**EXAMINE:** Lead the group to highlight the words in verse 20 that confirm Paul’s purpose in initiating the meeting. For further clarification direct the group to the information on Verse 20 in their PSG (p. 121).

**ASK:** *What are some of the things God uses to make it possible for a person to hear the gospel? How does God using a variety of things speak to His sovereignty in our world?* (PSG, p. 121)

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud Acts 28:21-23, while the group notes the Jewish leaders’ response to Paul.

**STATE:** *No one in Jerusalem had asked the leaders in Rome to get involved, so in their own self-interest they were not going to join the conflict. They knew about or had heard about those who had become Christians, but they considered it to be a sect. They were curious enough to come to Paul the next day. In verse 23, we note that the second meeting lasted a full day, and that Paul spent every moment presenting the gospel.*

**DISCUSS:** *What makes the gospel message so intriguing and interesting? How does that intrigue open the door to share the gospel with others? (PSG, p. 123)*

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read Acts 28:24-28, while half of the group notes the responses from Paul's listeners to the gospel and the other half notes what Paul said that caused the group to disagree among themselves. Provide time for each half of the group to share their findings.

**DIRECT:** Lead the group to examine Isaiah 6:9-10. Direct the individuals in the group to turn to a neighbor and discuss why Paul might have quoted these verses and how they applied to Paul's sharing with the Jewish leaders.

**EXPLAIN:** *Spiritual hardheartedness prevented the people hearing Isaiah's message from repenting and receiving God's healing, just as some of the Jewish leaders were unable to comprehend Paul's message and accept Jesus as the Messiah.*

**TRANSITION:** Read aloud again verse 24. Say: *Paul let it be known that the gospel is for all, both Jews and Gentiles.*

**ASK:** *How does the gospel divide and unite at the same time? Why does the gospel have this kind of effect on people? (PSG, p. 124)*

**REVIEW:** Call for the group to share words or phrases that point to Paul's determination. Invite them to share other characteristics of Paul as seen in this passage.

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## **SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)**

**CHALLENGE:** *If the gospel is for all and some will respond and some will not, how would you describe our responsibility as believers today? The title of the study is "Always on Mission." Do you see yourself as always on mission? Do you follow Paul's example and initiate conversations?*

**DIRECT:** Lead the group to examine the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 126) as a summary of the actions believers need to take to be faithful. Then allow partners to discuss the first question set: *Share with the group the circumstances that led to your hearing the gospel. Discuss the variety of ways God worked in the lives of the group members. Thank Him for making it possible for you to hear the gospel.*

**PRAY:** Guide the group in a silent prayer, asking that the individuals in the group pray that God would lay a name on their heart and that they would be faithful in boldly sharing the gospel. Ask that God help each person to be more attentive to opportunities for sharing the gospel this week and always.



## PRACTICE

- Be sure all individuals in the group have a PSG for the new Spring 2018 study, which will begin next week.
- Consider your own heart and life as a faithful witness and the actions you may need to take to be a better model for the group.
- Contact those not present and offer a personal invitation to attend Bible study next week.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Read the first paragraph on page 118 of the PSG. Then ask the group if they have ever been so sold on a product that they found themselves sharing it with others: *What kinds of products have others tried to encourage you to use because they found them to work for them? What makes their testimony more effective than a professional salesperson pitching the same product?* (PSG, p. 118) Caution: Avoid letting the discussion focus on products. Explain: *Just as hearing someone tell of their experience with a product encourages others to try it, so sharing our testimony of what Christ has done for us is powerful in encouraging others in their faith.*

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance the discussion of Acts 28:17-20, examine Paul's initiative in setting up the meeting with the Jewish leaders in Rome. Brainstorm ways Christians today can initiate discussions with unbelievers about God. Ask: *What are some natural ways you've begun discussions about Christ with unbelievers?*
- To supplement the study of Acts 28:24-28, utilize the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 125). Create four teams (an individual can be a team) and assign each team one of the following New Testament verses where Isaiah is quoted: Matthew 13:13-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; and John 12:39-40. Direct the group to examine the context of the verses and be ready to share with the whole group. Discuss: *What factors were the same and what were different in each of the passages?*

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to evaluate their faithfulness in sharing the gospel on a scale of one to ten. Use a signal of thumbs up, thumbs down, or thumbs sideways for people to indicate where they evaluated themselves compared to where they would like to be. As a group, determine actions that might support a higher level of faithfulness.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

To reinforce that the gospel is for all people and that we are to be faithful in sharing the gospel play "Find Us Faithful," by Steve Green, to close the session.

# LEADER PACK IDEAS

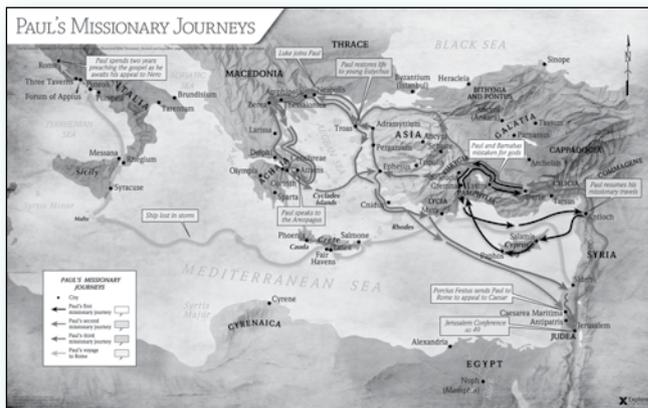
These items are available on the CD-ROM in the *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack* as PDFs to create your own handouts or media presentations for your group.

Items marked with \* are also available as reproducible masters on the CD-ROM included in the *Explore the Bible Leader Pack*.

## »» PACK ITEM 1

*Map: Paul's Missionary Journeys*  
Sessions 1-13

Locate a map in a Bible atlas that shows the missionary journeys of Paul.



**Pack Item 1 example** from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* (The Pack is available for purchase at [LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible).)



**Pack Item 2 example** from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* (The Pack is available for purchase at [LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible).)

## »» PACK ITEM 2

*Outline of Acts*  
Sessions 1-13

Refer to the outline printed on page 12.

## »» PACK ITEM 3

*Poster: Winter 2017-18*  
Sessions 1-13

Create a sign to post on the door where your group meets to welcome members to the study of Acts.

## »» PACK ITEM 4

*Time Line: Acts*  
Sessions 1-13

Locate a study Bible with a time line of the major people and events in Acts (from AD 30–62). Use it as a reference during this study.

## ▶▶ PACK ITEM 5

*Bookmark: Memory Verses  
Sessions 1-13*

Make a list of these suggested memory verses to distribute to your group:

- Acts 13:30
- Acts 14:15b
- Acts 15:9
- Luke 2:7
- Acts 16:5
- Acts 16:31
- Acts 17:30
- Psalm 139:14
- Acts 18:28
- Acts 20:35
- Acts 22:15
- Acts 26:20
- Acts 28:31

## ▶▶ PACK ITEM 6\*

*Poster: Paul's Missionary Team Members  
Sessions 3,5,9*

Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about those who traveled with Paul: Barnabas, John Mark, Silas, Timothy, Aquila and Priscilla, Luke, Erastus, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Tychicus, and Trophimus.

## ▶▶ PACK ITEM 7\*

*Poster: Key Cities in Paul's Journeys  
Sessions 2,5,7,9*

Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about the cities in Paul's missionary journeys: Antioch, Cyprus, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Macedonia, Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome.



**Pack Item 8 example** from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* (The Pack is available for purchase at [LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible).)

## ▶▶ PACK ITEM 8\*

*Chart: Paul's Recorded Sermons  
Sessions 1,10,12*

Create a poster with the location and theme of each of Paul's sermons recorded in the Book of Acts, using the following Scriptures: Acts 13:16-41; 17:22-32; 20:17-35; 22:1-29; 23:1-6; 24:1-25; 26:1-23; and 28:17-20.

## ▶▶ PACK ITEM 9\*

*Poster: Difficulties Faced by Early Missionaries  
Session 2,13*

Create a poster to display of all the setbacks Paul and the early missionaries encountered:

- Persecuted (Acts 13:50)
- Stoned (Acts 14:5-19)
- Mocked (Acts 17:18)
- Opposed (Acts 19:23-41)
- Plotted against (Acts 20:3)
- Mobbed and beaten (Acts 21:27-36)
- Threatened (Acts 22:22)
- Conspired against (Acts 23:12-22)
- Accused (Acts 24:1-9)
- Interrogated (Acts 25:24-27)
- Ridiculed (Acts 26:24)

- Imprisoned (Acts 23:33–26:32)
- Ignored (Acts 27:11)
- Shipwrecked (Acts 27:39–41)
- Snakebitten (Acts 28:3–5)

### »» **PACK ITEM 10**

*Poster: Acts 13:30*

*Session 1*

Display Acts 13:30 on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper.

### »» **PACK ITEM 11**

*Poster: Luke 2:7*

*Session 4*

Display Luke 2:7 on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper.

### »» **PACK ITEM 12**

*Poster: Acts 16:31*

*Session 6*

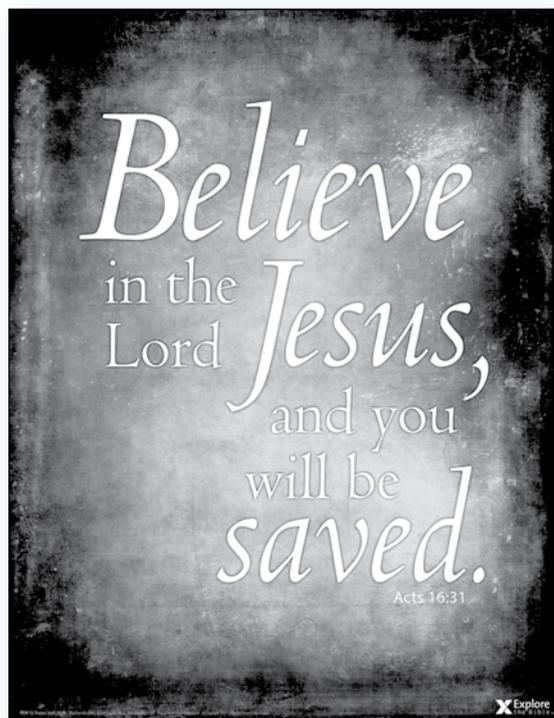
Display Acts 16:31 on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper.

### »» **PACK ITEM 13**

*Poster: Psalm 139:14*

*Session 8*

Display Psalm 139:14 on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper.



**Pack Item 12 example** from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* (The Pack is available for purchase at [LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible).)



# CONTROVERSY AND RESPONSE

C. Mack Roark



» The first great watershed in the history of earliest Christianity is recorded in Acts 15. A wrong decision at this point on this matter would forever change the nature and mission of the church. The expansion and growth of the church reported in the second half of Acts were possible only because of what happened here, for “at stake was nothing less than the very existence of the new movement itself, both its identity and its unity.”<sup>1</sup>

**Left unchecked, these Judaizers would fragment the church and change the gospel itself.**

The issue that gave rise to the conference called in Acts 15:1-3 actually started in Antioch, what had become the missionary center of the early Christian movement and the center for Gentile Christianity (Acts 13-14). Paul and Barnabas had proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth as the Jewish Messiah who was also the Savior of all people, and Gentiles had believed (13:48; 14:27). While this may have been good news in Antioch (and in Phoenicia and Samaria, 15:3), it was not good news to some in Jerusalem. Members of the “party of the Pharisees,” Jewish Christians who after conversion continued to live according to the pharisaical rule, listened with deep regret as they heard reports of more and more Gentiles coming to the Messiah. They thought the more the church reached out to the Gentiles the more it withdrew from Judaism. Soon, they thought, believers in Jesus, the Messiah of the Jews, would have no connection with their roots. The only way to prevent this crisis was an insistent emphasis on the Mosaic law, especially those parts of the law that marked one off as a Jew. So these pharisaic Christians (later called “Judaizers”) went to Antioch and preached the necessity of circumcision for salvation, for circumcision was the principal covenant marker for the Jew. To become a Christian one must first become a Jew.

Paul and Barnabas saw the seriousness of the issue. Left unchecked, these Judaizers would fragment the church and change the gospel itself. Their quick and potent reaction to this heresy became the occasion for the first major conference of the church.

To make clear the position of these Judaizers is important. Never would they say that Gentiles could not become Christians, nor did they object to the mission to the Gentiles. They did not forsake Christ, but neither would they forsake the law of Moses. Circumcision, they argued, was central to God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:9-14) and to the Torah, and they agreed with Paul that salvation in Christ is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. So where, they might ask, is it written that God changed His mind? Gentiles must enter that covenant as Abraham had, as devout Jews always had, with circumcision as the basic identity marker of a male Jew. Was not Jesus Himself circumcised? Had He ever set aside His Jewishness?

The entire discussion is not reported, for there was much debate, but the speeches of Peter and James<sup>2</sup> are given, with only brief mention of Barnabas and Paul. Peter argued from experience; James argued from Scripture.

Peter's housetop vision, followed by the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius (10:1-11:18), convinced him that God "made no distinction between us and them" (15:9) and that both Jew and Gentile alike are saved by grace only (15:11).

The brevity of Luke's report of Barnabas and Paul relating their experience in witnessing to Gentiles (15:12) put the spotlight on the other two speakers, both strong Jerusalem leaders whose words would carry more weight with any sympathizers of the Judaizers.

James's speech (15:13-21) and his letter to the church at Antioch (15:23-29) give his argument and his decision. The Lord's (half) brother and pastor of the Jerusalem church, he was likely the most influential leader present. He was a paradigmatic Jew and his rhetoric would appeal to Jews, James called Peter Simon (15:14), the Hebrew form of Peter's given



name. He appealed to Jewish Scriptures (Amos 9:11-12) to show that God long ago spoke of Gentiles as called by His name. And he insisted that Jewish scruples be respected (15:19-21). His decision apparently got unanimous support and came to be known as the Apostolic Decree.

The Apostolic Decree had two sides. In the first and primary place it stripped the Mosaic law, especially circumcision, of any saving value. Circumcision ceased to be essential and became an option. On the other hand, James, being sensitive to his

Jewish community, proposed four regulations that the Gentile converts should observe: abstain from food sacrificed to idols (Lev. 17:1-9), from unchastity (18:6-20), from that which has been strangled (17:13-14), and from blood (17:10-12). Leviticus 17 and 18 make clear that these laws are not for Jews only, but also for any resident aliens in their land. James identified the Gentile converts with the "strangers" of Leviticus 17. Thus Gentile believers were called on to observe only that part of the law that applied to them. In essence, Gentiles were to keep those laws that would allow comfortable table fellowship and worship with the Jews, for food laws, like circumcision for the male, served as a boundary marker for Judaism. Most Jews who became Christians would not think of abandoning these scruples, even with their new freedom in Christ. The issue would surface again and again in Paul's ministry (1 Cor. 8-9; Rom. 14).



So while Gentiles, in the spirit of 1 Corinthians 10:32, must make accommodations to the Jews so they might worship and have fellowship together, Jews must not add any of their traditions as condition to salvation for Gentiles.

## **At stake was the unity of the church, and that unity was preserved. Christianity transcends all boundaries and barriers.**

The impact of this decision can hardly be overestimated. First and most important, the gospel was not allowed to be perverted. Second, at stake was the unity of the church, and that unity was preserved. Christianity transcends all boundaries and barriers. Significantly, the Jewish church argued for and found in favor of Gentile inclusion, just as it earlier had gone the second mile on behalf of the Hellenists (Acts 6). Third, according to Paul's possible report of this episode in Galatians, the decision led to a division of missionary labor, with Paul heading the mission to the Gentiles and Peter the mission to the Jews.<sup>3</sup> Yet these Jewish and Gentile missions did not indicate two churches, nor two gospels, but two branches of one tree, each helping the other. Fourth, the Jerusalem Conference assured that Jesus' followers would not simply remain a sect of Judaism, but would become a world-embracing religion erasing any and all racial and cultural boundaries. It opened a new period in the history of the church. Fifth, the process followed sets a precedent for problem solving in the church. The procedure allowed open and honest discussion, appealed to Scripture, sought the Holy Spirit's guidance, and trusted the democratic process. Such a combination will go far toward assuring results that please God and advance His kingdom.

1. James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1996) 195.

2. This is James the brother of Jesus, not the son of Zebedee and brother of John. See Acts 12:2. The James of Acts 12:17 must then be Jesus' half-brother.

3. See Galatians 2:1-10. I suggest that this is an account of the same event seen in Acts 15. Both accounts agree on the basic issues and the basic resolution, but differ in some details.

This article first appeared in the Fall 2000 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. At the time of writing, Mack Roark was Dickinson Professor of Bible, Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, Oklahoma.

# BARNABAS: ALL WE KNOW

Roy E. Lucas

➤➤ “Encouragement is important business.”<sup>1</sup> When many Bible students hear the word, “encouragement,” Barnabas comes to mind. This encouraging man was born into a Levitical family from Cyprus. His parents named him Joseph, but the apostles in Jerusalem nicknamed him “Barnabas,” which means, “Son of Encouragement” (Acts 4:36). No other man in the New Testament demonstrated such consistent encouragement to his associates.

The early church saw in Barnabas “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (11:24). Several actions gave evidence of those traits. For example, he sold a field and gave the profit to the church (4:36-37). He intervened for Paul when the Jerusalem disciples and apostles



expressed concern about the former persecutor (9:26-27). Barnabas embraced John Mark when Paul rejected him as a partner for mission work (15:36-41). He supported Paul against some Judeans who wanted to force circumcision on the Gentile believers as part of salvation (Acts 15; Gal. 2:1-10). No other man in the New Testament demonstrated such consistent encouragement to his associates.

## BARNABAS'S PERSONALITY

*People Person*—Barnabas ministered alongside eleven people: Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Paul at Antioch (Acts 13:1); John Mark (12:25; 13:13; 15:36-41); Peter (Acts 15:7; Gal 2:9-13); James and John (Acts 15:13; Gal. 2:9); Joseph (called Barsabbas) and Silas (Acts 15:22); and Titus (Gal. 2:1).

Barnabas intervened on behalf of Paul when he needed an introduction to the leadership in Jerusalem (Acts 9:27). When facing the Jerusalem Council concerning the issue of Gentiles coming to faith in Christ, Barnabas supported Paul by contending that God saved Gentiles without them having to undergo circumcision (Acts 15). Later, preparing for the second missionary journey, Barnabas argued that John Mark should accompany Paul and himself on the trip—even though Mark had returned home early during the first missionary journey (vv. 36-39).

*Passionate Person*—When the Jews of Pisidian Antioch rejected the gospel, Barnabas fervently declared that he and Paul would be focusing on sharing the gospel with the Gentiles (13:46). When the people in Lystra tried to worship him and Paul as Zeus and Hermes, Barnabas and Paul protested by ripping their own robes (14:11-18). Later, Barnabas stood single-mindedly in the midst of the Jerusalem Council and defended the gospel he and Paul had preached throughout Asia Minor (15:12).

*Persevering Person*—That Barnabas persevered in defending and supporting both Paul and John Mark is obvious. Barnabas (and Paul) experienced persecution by devout Jewish women and men of Pisidian Antioch. Rather than abandon the task, Barnabas (and Paul) “shook the dust off their feet” and moved to Iconium (13:51). Barnabas remained faithful to Paul when Jews



came from Antioch and Iconium to Lystra and stoned Paul and left him for dead. Rather than forsake Paul, Barnabas went with him the next day to Derbe (14:19-20).

## BARNABAS'S GIFTS

*Pastor and Teacher*—Barnabas proved to be a gifted preacher and teacher. The church in Antioch of Syria recognized his gifts as he ministered there over a year and then as they commissioned him by the guidance of the Holy Spirit to take the gospel to other people (11:26; 13:1-4). He preached to Sergius Paulus (a Roman official who presided over Roman court hearings; 13:7) and at the following locations: Pisidian Antioch (vv. 42-43,46), Derbe (14:20-21), Lystra (vv. 21-23), and Perga (v. 25).

*Equipper*—Barnabas found Paul, who was in Tarsus, and brought him to Antioch to help teach (11:25-26). He teamed with Paul on the first missionary journey and sailed to Cyprus. He re-engaged John Mark in the work after his initial failure (15:36-39).

*Encourager*—Barnabas spoke up for Paul and John Mark. He encouraged the Jerusalem church to the point that they sent him to Antioch to evaluate the work (11:22). The apostles recognized his encouraging nature and nicknamed him, “Barnabas” (4:36).

## BARNABAS'S STRENGTHS

*Selflessness*—Barnabas exemplified what it meant to prefer other believers above himself (Phil. 2:3). He willingly shared leadership with Paul. He humbled himself by working to support himself (1 Cor. 9:6). He yielded the content of his preaching to the Jerusalem church elders so they could examine it.

*Loyalty*—The Jerusalem church recognized Barnabas's trustworthy character as being strong enough to represent them to the church of Antioch. The Antiochian believers expressed confidence in Barnabas by sending their offering to the Jerusalem church by him. This church commissioned Barnabas and Paul to carry the gospel into Asia Minor. Perhaps the greatest expression of faith in Barnabas's loyalty was God's gifting him to lead and preach among the churches.



Barnabas exemplified a man who lived in this world, but lived for another kingdom. His encouraging model for a Christ-centered life serves as a pattern for today's believers to follow.

This article is condensed from an article that appeared in the Fall 2012 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Roy E. Lucas is professor of New Testament at Clear Creek Baptist Bible College, Pineville, Kentucky.

1. Larry Crabb and Dan Allender, *Encouragement: The Key to Caring* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 9.

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# USING QUESTIONS IN A GODLY WAY

*Michael Kelley*



Most every parent has gone through the sweetly annoying stage of questions from their children. These are the days when kids seem to have an inexhaustible curiosity, and the correspondingly inexhaustible list of inquiries to go along with it. The questions range from why the sky is blue, to why certain animals have spots when others don't, to why we have to eat our vegetables.

The questions come in a flurry during that season of life—one right after the other, until most of the time the parent says that he or she has dispensed enough information for the day.

The reason kids ask these questions, at least in the purest sense, is because they lack information. They are sponges, wanting to soak up every bit of information that we, as the parents, have to give them. They assume that we actually are in possession of all this information, and will freely give it to them.

Parents ask their children questions, too, albeit for different reasons. Sometimes we ask our kids things because we feel distant from them. We want more than anything for our children to open up and share not only about what's going on in their lives, but also how it makes them feel. So questions for us are not really about information; they're more about intimacy. And we have such a strong desire for this intimacy that we can ask questions back to our children with the same frequency and intensity they once upon a time employed with us.

The badgered becomes the badgerer.

The same action—asking questions—is employed, but there is a different purpose behind it.

Now consider the fact that God, too, is a question asker. We see this happen many times in Scripture:

- When Adam and Eve first sinned, God responded with a question: “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9).



- When Adam and Eve presented themselves, God asked Eve directly, “What is this you have done?” (Gen. 3:13).
- When God responded to Job’s accusations, He used a series of questions beginning with, “Where were you when I...?” (Job 38:4).
- When Jonah was angry that God did what Jonah feared He would—relent on His punishment of the Ninevites—God asked him twice: “Is it right for you to be angry?” (Jonah 4).
- When the people said Jesus was a prophet or a reincarnation of John the Baptist, He asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15).

The list could go on. In each case, God is asking a question. And because questions serve different purposes, depending on the occasion, we might wonder what God’s intent is in asking these questions.

Well, we know first of all what His intent is not. We know that the question is not informational in nature because God already knows the answer. In fact, God actually knows the facts of every situation better than the people involved in the situation. And here we find one of the great purposes of God in His asking of questions.

God uses questions to force us to confront our own hearts. He questions us not because He needs to know and understand something about what’s going on, but because He wants us to know and understand the truth of what’s going on. Through questions, God forces us to turn our gaze on ourselves—our hearts and our motivations. He makes us look deeply into ourselves, knowing that He already knows, and then own up to that which we have either been unable or unwilling to see previously.

As He did in the garden, God might ask us, “Where are you?” not because He doesn’t know, but because He wants us to bring into the light the fear and shame that keeps us in hiding.

Or as He did with Jonah, God might force us to confront our own bias, prejudice, and bitterness so that we might, through His compassion and grace, actually move past it.

Or as Jesus did with the disciples, God might ask us again and again who He is—not because He has forgotten—but because He wants us to form the discipline in ourselves of speaking the truth of His character to our doubts over and over again.

This should mean a great deal to us because, as group leaders, questions are one of the most powerful tools we have at our disposal. So use them wisely. Don’t neglect them because, just as the Lord does with us, a simple question can wake someone up to a new reality they are currently blind to.

Michael Kelly serves as Director of Groups Ministry for LifeWay Christian Resources. This article originally appeared on the LifeWay Groups Ministry blog ([lifeway.com/groupministry](http://lifeway.com/groupministry)).



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- Session 1**    **United in Christ** > *1 Corinthians 1:10-25*
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- Session 3**    **Keeping Commitments** > *1 Corinthians 7:1-13*
- Session 4**    **Influencing for Christ** > *1 Corinthians 9:19-27; 10:31-33; 11:1*
- Session 5**    **Assurance of the Resurrection** > *John 20:2-9; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28*
- Session 6**    **Remembering the Sacrifice** > *1 Corinthians 11:17-29*
- Session 7**    **Serving God's People** > *1 Corinthians 12:4-12, 21-26*
- Session 8**    **Understanding Love** > *1 Corinthians 13:1-13*
- Session 9**    **Enjoying God's Comfort** > *2 Corinthians 1:3-14*
- Session 10**    **Displaying the Gospel** > *2 Corinthians 4:5-18*
- Session 11**    **Becoming New** > *2 Corinthians 5:16-21; 6:1-2*
- Session 12**    **Giving Faithfully** > *2 Corinthians 9:1-15*
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