

Sent by Love—Part 2

A Study of Acts 15-28

What's Included

For each passage in *Sent by Love—Part 2: A Study of Acts 15-28*, you will find the following:

- Outlines for each passage to help you understand their meaning and flow, designed to be enhanced and elaborated upon through your personal study and preparation
- Teaching helps embedded within these outlines to guide you as you teach classes or facilitate groups
- Questions for each passage to assist you with enabling class and group discussion

Commentaries

Teacher-friendly commentaries for *Sent by Love—Part 2: A Study of Acts 15-28*, include:

- *Acts: Cornerstone Bible Commentary* by William Larkin
- *Acts: NIV Application Commentary* by Ajith Fernando
- *Acts: St. Andrew's Expository Commentary* by R. C. Sproul

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Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church
Adult Discipleship Ministries
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Acts 15:1-21, “Jerusalem Council Meets”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 15:1-21 [5 minutes].

2. Review the story from Acts 1-14 [10 minutes].

3. Discuss the conflict within the early Christian community in Acts 15:1-6 [10 minutes].

- Do you need to become Jewish to become then a Christian?
- Paul and Barnabas: No, not at all! God is moving in the Greco-Roman world
- But some Jewish Christians: Yes, absolutely! We can't abandon our heritage
- Requires a meeting to hash out
- Describe why this tension exists between Jewish and Gentile Christians. What's the story?
- Cultural, racial, economic, political, and generational tensions continue into our day. How may we seek to address them in Christ-like ways within the Christian community?

4. Discuss the meeting's flow with Peter, Paul, and Barnabas in Acts 15:7-12 [10 minutes].

- After discussion, Peter recounts his experience (see Acts 10:1—11:18 for background)
- Key statement: “So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of Jesus.” (vv. 10-11, NLT)
- Paul and Barnabas tell the stories of how God is bringing Gentiles to Himself
- In the words of verse 11, how do we “challenge God” today when it comes to salvation by “the undeserved grace of Jesus” alone? Share some examples.
- Peter draws upon his previous experience in addressing the meeting. How is experience helpful in dealing with conflict? What other resources do we have?
- The witness that the Holy Spirit began with Paul and Barnabas continues even now. What are some contemporary examples of God's saving grace being shared and received by people you wouldn't ordinarily expect?

5. Discuss the solution offered by James in Acts 15:13-21 (10 minutes).

- Obviously James (half-brother of Jesus) has a leadership role in Jerusalem
- Recalls Amos 9:11-12 and Isaiah 45:21 as support
- Picks out a few points to concentrate on: don't eat food sacrificed to idols, don't be sexually immoral, don't violate kosher laws about consuming blood

- Why? Attempting to create a Jewish Christian to Gentile Christian dialogue
- Application of principle that Paul will describe in detail later on in Romans 14: even if you're free to do something, don't make fellow Christians stumble
- Why do you think James picks these particular practices to emphasize? What makes these especially applicable here?
- Give a present-day example of a practice you believe we are free in Christ to observe, but doing it will sometimes unnecessarily offend and hurt fellow Christians. Turn it around: what is something that you think Christians should not do, but other believers have little difficulty with doing it? How do we respond to such "gray" areas?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 15:1-21 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 1-14 as a whole. What sets the table for Acts 15:1-21? What is the "who, what, when, where, and how" of Acts 15:1-21?
- Describe why this tension exists between Jewish and Gentile Christians. What's the story?
- Cultural, racial, economic, political, and generational tensions continue into our day. How may we seek to address them in Christ-like ways within the Christian community?
- In the words of verse 11, how do we "challenge God" today when it comes to salvation by "the undeserved grace of Jesus" alone? Share some examples.
- Peter draws upon his previous experience in addressing the meeting. How is experience helpful in dealing with conflict? What other resources do we have?
- The witness that the Holy Spirit began with Paul and Barnabas continues even now. What are some contemporary examples of God's saving grace being shared and received by people you wouldn't ordinarily expect?
- Why do you think James picks these particular practices to emphasize? What makes these especially applicable here?
- Give a present-day example of a practice you believe we are free in Christ to observe, but doing it will sometimes unnecessarily offend and hurt fellow Christians. Turn it around: what is something that you think Christians should not do, but other believers have little difficulty with doing it? How do we respond to such "gray" areas?

Acts 15:22-35, “Letter for Gentile Christians”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 15:22-35 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 15:1-21 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the letter written to Gentile Christian communities in Acts 15:22-29 [15 minutes].

- Task force delegated to go to Antioch of Syria: Judas, Silas, Paul, and Barnabas
- Given full authority to communicate as representatives of the Jerusalem community
- Letter addresses the confusion: we didn't authorize the erroneous teaching!
- Describes the compromise reached in the meeting
- The letter takes great pains to disavow any connection with the “must be Jewish to be a Christian” movement. Is this more than covering one's behind? If so, why?
- What is significant about the people chosen to represent “headquarters” to the Gentile Christians? Why do you think they were selected?
- What do you think about the efforts thus far to repair the relationships between Jew and Gentile? How might these efforts apply to other relationships in need of repair today?

4. Discuss the reception of the letter in Acts 15:30-33a [15 minutes].

- An immediate trip to Antioch beckons
- A meeting of all the Christians there (not just the movers and shakers)
- Letter delivered and read, and then elaborated upon by Judas and Silas
- Paul and Barnabas there as well: lend credibility to the entire effort
- “They stayed a while” (v. 33a): the importance of relationship and community
- Instead of ordering representatives from Antioch to come to Jerusalem, Jerusalem sends representatives directly to Antioch. Do you think this was wise? If so, why?
- In the absence of social media (!), the Jerusalem representatives address a large gathering of Gentile Christians for a long time. Why do you think Jerusalem chose to do it this way?
- What can we learn from the Jerusalem response as a whole for our contentious issues?

5. Discuss the response offered in Acts 15:33b-35 (5 minutes).

- Antioch Christians respond with affirmation; Jerusalem delegation returns home
- But Paul and Barnabas stay to disciple the Christians more

- Verse 34 is missing in most modern translations: says that Silas stays too
- Why is Antioch's affirmation important to the growth of the Christian movement?
- What is significant about Paul and Barnabas (and maybe Silas) staying behind?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 15:22-35 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 15:1-21 briefly. How does it set up what we are reading today?
- What is the "who, what, when, where, and how" of Acts 15:22-35?
- The letter takes great pains to disavow any connection with the "must be Jewish to be a Christian" movement. Is this more than covering one's behind? If so, why?
- What is significant about the people chosen to represent "headquarters" to the Gentile Christians? Why do you think they were selected?
- What do you think about the efforts thus far to repair the relationships between Jew and Gentile? How might these efforts apply to other relationships in need of repair today?
- Instead of ordering representatives from Antioch to come to Jerusalem, Jerusalem sends representatives directly to Antioch. Do you think this was wise? If so, why?
- In the absence of social media (!), the Jerusalem representatives address a large gathering of Gentile Christians for a long time. Why do you think Jerusalem chose to do it this way?
- What can we learn from the Jerusalem response as a whole for our contentious issues?
- Why is Antioch's affirmation important to the growth of the Christian movement?
- What is significant about Paul and Barnabas (and maybe Silas) staying behind?

Acts 15:36—16:5, “Paul & Barnabas Separate; 2nd Missionary Journey Begins”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 15:36—16:5 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 15:22:35 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the breakup of the ministry relationship in Acts 15:36-41 [15 minutes].

- Paul and Barnabas gear up for a second journey, but Barnabas wants to take John Mark again
- But John Mark quit on them last time; Paul disagrees strongly and it becomes a deal-breaker
- Barnabas and John Mark go to Cyprus (Barnabas' home); Paul goes off with Silas
- Acts appears to take Paul's side without actually saying so: continues to follow Paul and Silas with affirmation of their mission, with no further mention with Barnabas and John Mark
- Much conjecture about the “real reason” for their fallout, but text connects it to John Mark
- Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark appear to reconcile much later (1 Cor 9:10, Col 4:10, 2 Tim 4:11)
- Are Paul and Barnabas models we should follow? Why or why not? How should Christians disagree with one another? What other Scriptures may help us with this question?
- Is conflict always bad or wrong? When have you been part of a conflict that was necessary? How did things turn out?
- Church fights are often quite devastating. Do you know people hurt by a church fight? Or have you been hurt by such a dispute? How can we move through anger, disappointment, and pain?

4. Discuss the introduction of Timothy in Acts 16:1-3 [15 minutes].

- In the course of revisiting Derbe and Lystra, we are introduced to Timothy
- Jewish mother (also grandmother, according to 2 Tim 1:5) and Greek father
- Take Timothy to Iconium, where he's well-received
- Circumcised to placate Jews in the area because Timothy's parentage is well-known
- Some have seen an unfortunate compromise here; others a helpful compromise
- Paul is excited about Timothy serving with them. Why do you think this is the case? What does Timothy bring to the table that would be helpful?

- Is Timothy's circumcision a mistake by Paul? Or a benefit to the ministry? Discuss.
- In our world, sometimes we need to compromise. Other times we must stand firm. How do we discern which approach to take? What keys do we look for?

5. Discuss the continuation of ministry in Acts 16:4-5 (5 minutes).

- Paul, Silas, and Timothy pass on the instruction from Jerusalem to Gentile believers
- Continue to work on discipleship with the Christians along the way to their next journey
- Discipleship is a continuing emphasis by Paul and now Silas and Timothy. Why do you think this gets repeated time and time again? What does it say to us now about the importance of growth in discipleship?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 15:36—16:5 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 15:22-35 briefly. How does it set up what we are reading today?
- What is the “who, what, when, where, and how” of Acts 15:36—16:05?
- Are Paul and Barnabas models we should follow? Why or why not? How should Christians disagree with one another? What other Scriptures may help us with this question?
- Is conflict always bad or wrong? When have you been part of a conflict that was necessary? How did things turn out?
- Church fights are often quite devastating. Do you know people hurt by a church fight? Or have you been hurt by such a dispute? How can we move through anger, disappointment, and pain?
- Paul is excited about Timothy serving with them. Why do you think this is the case? What does Timothy bring to the table that would be helpful?
- Is Timothy's circumcision a mistake by Paul? Or a benefit to the ministry? Discuss.
- In our world, sometimes we need to compromise. Other times we must stand firm. How do we discern which approach to take? What keys do we look for?
- Discipleship is a continuing emphasis by Paul and now Silas and Timothy. Why do you think this gets repeated time and time again? What does it say to us now about the importance of growth in discipleship?

Acts 16:6-15 - “The Macedonian Call; Lydia Believes”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 16:6-15 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 15:36—16:5 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the guidance of the Holy Spirit to Macedonia in Acts 16:6-10 [15 minutes].

- Paul and Silas begin their journey, but hit a roadblock: The Spirit, in some manner, stops them from going to Asia or Bithynia (not told the methods the Spirit uses)
- Note the equating of the Holy Spirit in v. 6 with “the spirit of Jesus” in v. 7 (ESV)
- Paul receives a vision: Macedonian man saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (v. 9, ESV)
- Paul and team act on the vision ASAP, concluding this is the path God desires
- Luke apparently part of the team now, based on v. 10, “immediately we sought to go...” (v. 10, ESV)
- How do you think the Spirit kept Paul and team out of Asia and Bithynia? Direct visions? Still small voices? Situations and “closed doors”? Other? How does God direct us today?
- How are circumstances and events in our lives possible guidance from the Spirit? How can we, at times, misread these same circumstances and events and go away from what the Spirit wants?
- How important is Paul’s desire to act immediately upon the guidance he received? How important is it for us to act when God guides us? What keeps us from doing so on many occasions?

4. Discuss the first steps in Macedonia in Acts 16:11-13 [10 minutes].

- From Troas, Paul and team make a beeline to Samothrace and Neapolis in Macedonia
- Next stop: Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia; Roman colony gives the city advantages many other cities lack
- Evidently not enough Jews there to establish a synagogue, so the usual method won’t work
- Instead, they go to the riverside, reputed to be a place of gathering and prayer, and sit down with a group of women (very counter-cultural, especially for a group of Jewish men)
- Paul and his team choose to go to the leading city of the region, Philippi. Why do you think they chose this destination? What, if anything, does this choice say to us in our day?

- Flexibility appears to be a key component of this second missionary journey thus far. How do you see the ability to adapt and change to be part of your own Christian ministry?

5. Discuss the significance of the conversion of Lydia in Acts 16:14-15 (10 minutes).

- Among the women gathered in vv. 11-13 is Lydia originally from Thyatira
- A woman of financial means (merchant of expensive cloths and textiles), and a God-fearer
- Responds to the gospel shared by Paul, responds, and is baptized along with her household
- But she is willing to take next steps: her home becomes the base for the ministry in Philippi.
- Note how unusual it is in that day for Jewish men to associate with Gentile women. How does God break through these barriers? How is God breaking through such barriers today?
- Who in your life needs to hear the good news of Jesus? How can you pray for them? How may you share with them in a conversation or some other means?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 16:6-15 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 15:36—16:5 briefly. How does it set up what we are reading today? What is the “who, what, when, where, and how” of Acts 16:6-15?
- How do you think the Spirit kept Paul and team out of Asia and Bithynia? Direct visions? Still small voices? Situations and “closed doors”? Other? How does God direct us today?
- How are circumstances and events in our lives possible guidance from the Spirit? How can we, at times, misread these same circumstances and events and go away from what the Spirit wants?
- How important is Paul’s desire to act immediately upon the guidance he received? How important is it for us to act when God guides us? What keeps us from doing so on many occasions?
- Flexibility appears to be a key component of this second missionary journey thus far. How do you see the ability to adapt and change to be part of your own Christian ministry?
- Note how unusual it is in that day for Jewish men to associate with Gentile women. How does God break through these barriers? How is God breaking through such barriers today?
- Who in your life needs to hear the good news of Jesus? How can you pray for them? How may you share with them in a conversation or some other means?

Acts 16:16-40, “Paul & Silas in Prison”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 16:15-40 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 16:6-15 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the imprisonment of Paul and Silas in Acts 16:16-24 [15 minutes].

- Demon-possessed slave girl keeps following Paul and Silas, announcing they are from God
- Confusion of the occult with the gospel, and Paul’s growing frustration, lead to her exorcism
- Financial, ethnic, and religious concerns as slave owners convince local magistrates to arrest Paul and Silas: financial in that they lost income; ethnic in that they play the “Jewish” card; religious in that they claim Paul and Silas advocate beliefs not lawful for or worthy of Romans
- Paul and Silas treated quite harshly as prisoners with no rights
- The gospel releases the slave girl from her spiritual bondage. How does the gospel address our need for liberation?
- Proclaiming the good news here brings with it the suffering Jesus speaks of so often in the Gospels. Look back in John chapters 15-17 to see what Jesus says about this topic, and then talk about its application to our lives.
- The kingdom of God comes into conflict with the kingdoms of this world in multiple ways. Describe examples of this conflict you see in the world today. How do we live in light of this?

4. Discuss the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his family in Acts 16:25-34 [15 minutes].

- Paul and Silas singing hymns and praying as earthquake strikes; opens all the prison doors and unfastens all the chains from prisoners
- Jailer ready to kill himself in expectation of even worse fate for failed security
- Paul stops him, and in response to the man’s plea for help (not necessarily a call for Christian salvation) shares the gospel with him
- Paul and Silas share the gospel with the entire household, and all are converted and baptized
- Paul and Silas do the right thing, and they are thrown in jail. How do they respond to this injustice? How do we act when the old cliché “no good deed goes unpunished” hits home to us?
- Many people today hold that salvation (whatever one means by this term), like the jailer and his household experienced, is found in many things and places.

What is a Christian response to this claim? How do we resist the present-day cultural pressure?

- God moves in a mighty way here. How does God move today in your experience? If you're not seeing God move, why do you think that is the case?

5. Discuss Paul's refusal to leave Philippi secretly in Acts 16:35-40 (5 minutes).

- Magistrates decide to release Paul and Silas
- Paul brings up his Roman citizenship, for treatment he received was illegal toward citizens
- Receive apologies and encouraged to leave; Paul and Silas touch base with Lydia and leave
- Paul assertively pursues what others would have left alone. Why do you think he does this? Is it a good move for the young Philippian church? Why or why not?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 16:16-40 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 16:6-15 briefly. How does it set up what we are reading today? What is the "who, what, when, where, and how" of Acts 16:16-40?
- The gospel releases the slave girl from her spiritual bondage. How does the gospel address our need for liberation? Proclaiming the good news here brings with it the suffering Jesus speaks of so often in the Gospels. Look back in John chapters 15-17 to see what Jesus says about this topic, and then talk about its application to our lives.
- The kingdom of God comes into conflict with the kingdoms of this world in multiple ways. Describe examples of this conflict you see in the world today. How do we live in light of this?
- Paul and Silas do the right thing, and they are thrown in jail. How do they respond to this injustice? How do we act when the old cliché "no good deed goes unpunished" hits home to us?
- Many people today hold that salvation (whatever one means by this term), like the jailer and his household experienced, is found in many things and places. What is a Christian response to this claim? How do we resist the present-day cultural pressure?
- God moves in a mighty way here. How does God move today in your experience? If you're not seeing God move, why do you think that is the case?
- Paul assertively pursues what others would have left alone. Why do you think he does this? Is it a good move for the young Philippian church? Why or why not?

Acts 17:1-15 - “Ministry in Thessalonica and Berea”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 17:1-15 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 16:16-40 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the outreach in Thessalonica in Acts 17:1-4 [10 minutes].

- Moving on from the trouble in Philippi, through Amphipolis and Apollonia, to Thessalonica
- Enough Jews for a synagogue, so Paul follows standard procedure and goes there first
- Proclaims cross and resurrection of Jesus boldly for three Sabbaths
- Persuasive: Jews as well as leading Greeks in the city respond with faith in Jesus
- Paul focuses on the cross and resurrection during his time at the synagogue. Why do you think he considers them the essential components of the gospel?
- What happens when Christianity becomes an ethical movement instead of a community built on the cross and resurrection? How do Christian ethics become, oddly enough, more difficult when this happens?

4. Discuss the persecution of the church in Acts 17:5-9 [10 minutes].

- Jewish resistance in the city increases: mob attacks Jason, local Christian leader
- Could not find Paul and Silas, so drag Jason and cohorts before the authorities
- Key verse on the impact of the gospel: “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also” (v. 7, ESV)
- Charge against Christians in Thessalonica that will become more and more prominent: “acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (v. 8, ESV)
- Christianity is turning the world upside down in the first century. How does the gospel continue to turn the world upside in our time? Please give concrete examples.
- Christians are accused of being anti-government and pro-government on many occasions. How are Christians to regard the state? (This is a hot-button issue, so be kind to each other.)

5. Discuss the ministry in Berea in Acts 17:10-15 (15 minutes).

- Christians in Thessalonica send Paul and Silas away to Berea
- Go to synagogue again and receive a warm welcome; locals are “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (v. 11, ESV)
- Many Jewish and Greek converts again, as in Thessalonica

- Thessalonian Jews hear Paul is preaching the gospel in Berea and pursue them there
- Escape plan: Paul conveyed to Athens, while Silas and Timothy remain
- The Bereans are lauded for what particular characteristic? Why is this characteristic so important even now?
- How do you respond as a Christian when you face determined, even fanatical, opposition?
- If most of us had been along with Paul and his team, we would be saying that the turmoil we are experiencing is a sign we should stop now. But this is not the case. Why and how do you think they continue to evangelize and to disciple in the course of people wanting to kill them?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 17:1-15 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 16:16-40 briefly. How does it set up what we are reading today? What is the “who, what, when, where, and how” of Acts 17:1-15?
- Paul focuses on the cross and resurrection during his time at the synagogue. Why do you think he considers them the essential components of the gospel?
- What happens when Christianity becomes an ethical movement instead of a community built on the cross and resurrection? How do Christian ethics become, oddly enough, more difficult when this happens?
- Christianity is turning the world upside down in the first century. How does the gospel continue to turn the world upside in our time? Please give concrete examples.
- Christians are accused of being anti-government and pro-government on many occasions. How are Christians to regard the state? (This is a hot-button issue, so be kind to each other.)
- The Bereans are lauded for what particular characteristic? Why is this characteristic so important even now?
- How do you respond as a Christian when you face determined, even fanatical, opposition?
- If most of us had been along with Paul and his team, we would be saying that the turmoil we are experiencing is a sign we should stop now. But this is not the case. Why and how do you think they continue to evangelize and to disciple in the course of people wanting to kill them?

Acts 17:16-40, “Paul Preaches in Athens”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 17:16-40 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 17:1-15 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss Paul’s evangelism in Acts 17:16-21 [10 minutes].

- Paul “deeply troubled” (NLT) or “his spirit was provoked within him” (ESV) by rampant idolatry of Athens; Greek word “paroxynomai;” English “paroxysm”
- Visits synagogue for Jews and God-fearers; also goes to central marketplace
- Debates and discusses the gospel with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens (see descriptions of Epicureanism and Stoicism in *Acts: Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, 544-547, and *Acts: NIV Application Commentary*, 474)
- Considered “babbler” (lit. “seed-picker,” bird flitting around; not complementary)
- Brought to “high council” (NLT) or “Areopagus” (ESV, the hill of Ares/Mars) to judge teaching
- The idols Paul sees in Athens are certainly not the first ones he has seen during his journeys in the Greco-Roman world. What do you think provokes such a visceral response in him this time?
- What idols beckon us in today’s world? Make a list as you think of some. Why are we humans so drawn to false gods? Why are we humans so inventive with the idols we create?

4. Discuss Paul’s address to the Athenian intellectual leaders in Acts 17:22-32a [15 minutes].

- Not Paul’s usual style: starts with seeing an idol for “unknown God” in city
- Paul’s claim: knows this God; gives several characteristics in verses 24-27
- Quotes Epimenides of Crete and poet Aratus in verse 28; no Scripture quoted
- Leads to call for repentance and faith in verses 29-31
- Talk of resurrection provokes mocking by some, effectively stopping Paul’s presentation; cross not mentioned by Paul either by choice or by interruption
- How is Paul’s talk different from what you’ve seen him do elsewhere in Acts? What stands out?
- What characteristics of God does Paul emphasize? Why do you think he chooses these? What characteristics of God would you emphasize today in a spiritual conversation with a non-Christian friend?
- In mentioning the idol to the unknown God and quoting from Athenian thinkers and artists, Paul makes a concerted effort to relate to the specific context in which he is speaking. How can we do the same today?

5. Discuss the response to Paul's evangelistic efforts in Acts 17:32b-34 (10 minutes).

- Others say they want to hear more: motives unclear (Just to talk about the latest fad? Or sincere respondents to Paul's call?)
- Yet some respond: Dionysius, a member of the council; woman Damaris
- If Athenian church established, not a strong one; no later mention in New Testament
- How do you evaluate Paul's effectiveness in bearing a Christian witness in Athens? Some say Paul failed. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- What role do results play as we evaluate the effectiveness of our witness to others? How do we address the tension in our witness today between what works and what is faithful?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 17:16-34 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 17:1-15 briefly. How does it set up what we are reading today? What is the "who, what, when, where, and how" of Acts 17:16-34?
- The idols Paul sees in Athens are certainly not the first ones he has seen during his journeys in the Greco-Roman world. What do you think provokes such a visceral response in him this time?
- What idols beckon us in today's world? Make a list as you think of some. Why are we humans so drawn to false gods? Why are we humans so inventive with the idols we create?
- How is Paul's talk different from what you've seen him do elsewhere in Acts? What stands out?
- What characteristics of God does Paul emphasize? Why do you think he chooses these? What characteristics of God would you emphasize today in a spiritual conversation with a non-Christian friend?
- In mentioning the idol to the unknown God and quoting from Athenian thinkers and artists, Paul makes a concerted effort to relate to the specific context in which he is speaking. How can we do the same today?
- How do you evaluate Paul's effectiveness in bearing a Christian witness in Athens? Some say Paul failed. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- What role do results play as we evaluate the effectiveness of our witness to others? How do we address the tension in our witness today between what works and what is faithful?

Acts 18:1-17, “Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 18:1-17 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 17:16-40 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the connection between Paul and Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18:1-3 [10 minutes].

- Paul journeys to Corinth, an important (and decadent) port city, center of Aphrodite worship
- There he establishes a relationship with Aquila and Priscilla, Jews from Rome
- Priscilla and Aquila introduce something new: they are Christians through means other than previous missionary activity in Acts; Jews from Rome present at Pentecost is the only link
- Shared trade: tentmakers, usually understood to include most anything made with leather
- According to Acts 18:3, how connected does Paul become with Aquila and Priscilla beyond sharing the same trade? How might this level of relationship be helpful to Paul in his work in Corinth?
- In Priscilla and Aquila, we are introduced to Christians who came to faith in Christ apparently in either Rome (most likely) or possibly Pontus. Why might Luke think it is important to note this? Why is it helpful to be reminded of God's redemptive activity expanding far beyond our particular knowledge and experience?

4. Discuss Paul's witness in Corinth in Acts 18:4-8 [15 minutes].

- Paul follows usual pattern: encountering Jews and Greeks first at local synagogue
- Given more support as Silas and Timothy arrive, freeing Paul to evangelize full-time
- Receptivity of Corinthians to the gospel appears significant, with the support of Titius Justus (God-fearer living next to the synagogue whose home becomes the base of operations) and Crispus (leader of the synagogue who converts)
- Ministry seems to be more productive and less dangerous in Corinth
- Why do we experience widely varying results in ministry we attempt, especially in circumstances in which we have not done anything intentionally different than before? What accounts for the variety of experiences?
- When life and ministry are going well, how tempting is it to begin thinking the results are primarily our doing? What is the problem with this line of thinking?

5. Discuss Paul's vision and its confirmation in Acts 18:9-17 (10 minutes).

- Paul receives God's three-fold command and promise, paralleling visions sometimes given to OT leaders/prophets (examples: Deut. 31:6; Josh. 1:5; 1 Kgs. 19; Isa. 41:10, 43:5; Jer. 1:7-9)
- Not told the reason for the vision; Paul stays in Corinth for 18 months
- When Jewish opponents then attempt to cause legal problems for Paul, newly arrived governor Gallio both protects Paul and allows the beating of Sosthenes, new leader of synagogue
- The vision Paul receives seems unconnected to how well the mission is going thus far in Corinth. Why do you think the vision comes at this time?
- Paul is human, so what previous experiences might lead him to be fearful? How do our previous experiences impact our spiritual lives? How do we keep from living in fear in today's anxiety-provoking world?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 18:1-17 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 17:16-34 briefly. How does it set up what we are reading today? Share the "who, what, when, where, and how" of Acts 18:1-17.
- According to Acts 18:3, how connected does Paul become with Aquila and Priscilla beyond sharing the same trade? How might this level of relationship be helpful to Paul in his work in Corinth?
- In Priscilla and Aquila, we are introduced to Christians who came to faith in Christ apparently in either Rome (most likely) or possibly Pontus. Why might Luke think it is important to note this? Why is it helpful to be reminded of God's redemptive activity expanding far beyond our particular knowledge and experience?
- Why do we experience widely varying results in ministry we attempt, especially in circumstances in which we have not done anything intentionally different than before? What accounts for the variety of experiences?
- When life and ministry are going well, how tempting is it to begin thinking the results are primarily our doing? What is the problem with this line of thinking?
- Why is success sometimes harder to live with than mediocrity or failure? How do you cope with success?
- The vision Paul receives seems unconnected to how well the mission is going thus far in Corinth. Why do you think the vision comes at this time?
- Paul is human, so what previous experiences might lead him to be fearful? How do our previous experiences impact our spiritual lives? How do we keep from living in fear in today's anxiety-provoking world?

Acts 18:18-28, “2nd Missionary Journey Ends; Apollos Instructed”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 18:18-28 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 18:1-17 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss Paul’s vow in Acts 18:18 [10 minutes].

- Many believe Paul is completing a Nazirite vow (Numbers 6) about his work in Corinth; not all scholars agree, as some think it is a less specific vow
- Regardless, vow taking, keeping is key component of first-century Jewish piety
- Is Paul backtracking on the Jerusalem Council’s decision about Christ and the Law (Acts 15) by using a technique of the Mosaic Law? Why or why not?
- How and when can vows to God be a helpful spiritual practice for us today? Please give examples from your life experience.

4. Discuss Paul’s initial visit to Ephesus and beyond in Acts 18:19-23 [5 minutes].

- Paul makes a preliminary visit to Ephesus to “reason with the Jews” (NLT, v. 19)
- Summary account of Paul’s travels prior to and at the beginning of his third missionary journey: Ephesus, Caesarea, Jerusalem, back to Antioch, then to Galatia and Phrygia
- Paul is a long way from the comforts of home in a day without modern transportation methods or frequent flyer credits. What compels him to visit all these cities and to expend all this energy? When and where has God called you out of your comfort zone as part of your discipleship?

5. Discuss the importance of Priscilla and Aquila’s interaction with Apollos in Acts 18:24-28 (20 minutes).

- Apollos from Alexandria, city with many Jews (perhaps 1/3 of city Jewish)
- Gifted in eloquence and intellect, but only knows about John’s baptism, so he doesn’t have the entire story (minus clarity about the Spirit’s presence and power, for instance)
- Priscilla and Aquila confront and encourage Apollos privately; take time to share the gospel with him in greater detail and to disciple him; important to note Priscilla’s name mentioned first
- After further training and education, Apollos is encouraged to go to Achaia (region around Corinth) to preach and teach there, achieving much through his teaching ministry
- Ephesian church supports and sends communications to Corinthian church about Apollos
- Priscilla and Aquila show a “high emotional IQ” in taking Apollos aside privately. When has someone shown you that respect? When have you shown it?

- Among his many salutary qualities, Apollos is teachable and open to loving, constructive guidance from Priscilla and Aquila. Why is his teachability so important? How can we practice being teachable?
- Many commentators believe Priscilla being mentioned first is a counter-cultural indication she led in both confronting and discipling Apollos. MDPC and our denomination ECO encourage women in ministry in part because of this biblical witness. What blessings and challenges do women in ministry face today? How can we encourage and strengthen them?
- How important is effective, sound, passionate Bible teaching for making disciples? What are characteristics of this teaching? What happens to a church when this teaching is not present?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 18:18-28 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 18:1-17 briefly. How does it lead into what we are reading today? Tell briefly the “who, what, when, where, and how” of Acts 18:18-28.
- How and when can vows to God be a helpful spiritual practice for us today? Please give examples from your life experience.
- Paul is a long way from the comforts of home in a day without modern transportation methods or frequent flyer credits. What compels him to visit all these cities and to expend all this energy? When and where has God called you out of your comfort zone as part of your discipleship?
- Priscilla and Aquila show a “high emotional IQ” in taking Apollos aside privately. When has someone shown you that respect? When have you shown it?
- Among his many salutary qualities, Apollos is teachable and open to loving, constructive guidance from Priscilla and Aquila. Why is his teachability so important? How can we practice being teachable?
- Many commentators believe Priscilla being mentioned first is a counter-cultural indication she led in both confronting and discipling Apollos. MDPC and our denomination ECO encourage women in ministry in part because of this biblical witness. What blessings and challenges do women in ministry face today? How can we encourage and strengthen them?
- How important is effective, sound, passionate Bible teaching for making disciples? What are characteristics of this teaching? What happens to a church when this teaching is not present?

Acts 19:1-20, “3rd Missionary Journey Begins to Ephesus”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 19:1-20 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 18:18-28 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the coming of the Spirit upon the 12 Ephesian disciples in Acts 19:1-7 [10 minutes].

- Meanwhile, while Apollos is in Corinth, Paul travels to Ephesus; already Christians there
- Finds small group of believers (note the number!) who only know John's baptism; power and presence of the Spirit is not a reality in their lives
- Paul instructs/baptizes, and the Spirit comes with an “Ephesian Pentecost” (NIV Application Commentary, p. 508)
- It is debated by commentators whether or not the “believers” (NLT) or “disciples” (ESV) are really Christians. Some say yes, others no, still others unsure. What do you think? Why?
- How difficult is it to live as a follower of Jesus Christ without the Spirit's presence and power? What difference does the Spirit make in your daily life?

4. Discuss the spiritual warfare present in Ephesus in Acts 19:8-16 [15 minutes].

- Paul preaches/teaches at synagogue three months; then moves to lecture hall after opposition
- Two years of ministry in Ephesus; so much more than a week's evangelistic crusade
- Much spiritual opposition and warfare; Ephesus known as a center of occult activity and center of Artemis/Diana worship, goddess of fertility
- No surprise why Paul writes about spiritual warfare so much in Ephesians 6!
- Story of seven sons of Sceva, alleged high priestly family (not in any official record; probably saying this to gain support in Ephesus), who use Jesus' name as a magic spell
- Evil spirit: “I know Jesus, and I know Paul, but who are you?” (Verse 15, NLT)
- Why is the length of time Paul spends in Ephesus important to note? What does it reveal to us?
- How does the context of a particular location/culture/circumstances shape a group's witness to Christ in that location/culture/circumstance?
- Most Western Christians give little credence to spiritual warfare and overtly supernaturalism, while the developing world often gives them great emphasis. Why are we largely skeptical about these matters today? What do we gain and lose by this skepticism?

5. Discuss the response to the gospel in Acts 19:17-20 (10 minutes).

- New and established Christians publicly confess and repent of occult practices
- Costly commitment to Christ: materials worth “several million dollars” (NLT)
- “Paul’s strategy was to argue against idolatry so that people, realizing the futility of idols, would put them away themselves. If they were to accept Christ, they had to reject idols and cease to depend on any other non-Christian religious practice. I usually do this with Buddhists and Hindus before they pray a prayer of commitment to Christ. I do not lead them into the step of commitment unless they are willing to forsake all other gods. This sometimes elicits opposition.” (Ajith Fernando, *Acts: NIV Application Commentary*, 524)
- How do the Ephesians make clear their commitment is to Christ alone? How does their example instruct us? How do you need to make clear your commitment is to Christ alone?
- What idols do 21st-century Americans find attractive? How may we forsake them? What idols tempt you?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 19:1-20 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 18:18-28 briefly. How does it lead to what we are reading today? State the “who, what, when, where, and how” of Acts 19:1-20.
- It is debated by commentators whether or not the “believers” (NLT) or “disciples” (ESV) are really Christians. Some say yes, others no, still others unsure. What do you think? Why?
- How difficult is it to live as a follower of Jesus Christ without the Spirit’s presence and power? What difference does the Spirit make in your daily life?
- Why is the length of time Paul spends in Ephesus important to note? What does it reveal to us?
- How does the context of a particular location/culture/circumstances shape a group’s witness to Christ in that location/culture/circumstance?
- Most Western Christians give little credence to spiritual warfare and overtly supernaturalism, while the developing world often gives them great emphasis. Why are we largely skeptical about these matters today? What do we gain and lose by this skepticism?
- How do the Ephesians make clear their commitment is to Christ alone? How does their example instruct us? How do you need to make clear your commitment is to Christ alone?
- What idols do 21st-century Americans find attractive? How may we forsake them? What idols tempt you?

Acts 19:21-41, “Riot in Ephesus”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 19:21-41 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 19:1-20 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss Paul’s prompting to go to Jerusalem and then Rome in Acts 19:21-22 [10 minutes].

- Paul senses guidance from the Holy Spirit as to his next steps: Macedonia, Achaia, Jerusalem
- Then (surprisingly) Rome, the empire’s capital and largest city by far
- Timothy and Erastus to prepare for Paul’s Macedonian ministry
- Does the biblical text say how Paul receives this guidance from the Spirit? How might he have received such guidance, based on his history? How do you receive guidance from the Holy Spirit? Talk about the ways you most commonly experience this guidance.
- What is the allure of going to Rome with the gospel? Where would we go today to accomplish the same thing?

4. Discuss the trouble from Demetrius and his people in Acts 19:23-28 [15 minutes].

- Demetrius and his people manufacture shrines for the worship of the goddess Artemis
- But what is the problem as Demetrius does his market analysis of future prospects? Too many people are becoming followers of Jesus Christ!
- If this continues, Demetrius states: 1) we will lose money as fewer people buy our shrines; 2) we will lose status and influence as fewer people worship Artemis
- A riot begins as more and more Ephesians take up the rallying cry, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”
- How is Demetrius not just an interested, objective bystander, but someone with “skin in the game”? What is his perspective, as his comments illustrate?
- Give at least one example of a vested interest in a community, town, city, nation, or culture that attempted to block Christian proclamation, witness, and ethics. Your example can be either large or small, either historical or contemporary. Discuss how and why this vested interest fought against Christian faith and practice, and how Christians responded.
- Historically, money and power have been considered two of the three most dangerous temptations for all desiring to follow Jesus. How do you struggle with and seek to overcome the temptations associated with money and power? In a faith community, how do we help each other to withstand these temptations?

5. Discuss the riot in Ephesus and its aftermath in Acts 19:29-41 (10 minutes).

- Ephesians gather in the civic amphitheater; Paul wants to take advantage of the opportunity to speak, but is prohibited by Christians and officials
- Ephesian Jews hope Alexander can explain how Jews differ from Christians, but the crowd shouts him down upon realizing he is Jewish (anti-Semitism common in Roman culture)
- Mayor of the city (more like an administrative officer or clerk) calms the crowd
- In so doing, the mayor acknowledges Christians have done nothing warranting this response, providing legal cover perhaps for later ministry, and warns that Rome may want an accounting
- How does the mayor defuse the situation? What might we learn from a pagan official?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 19:21-41 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 19:1-20 briefly. How does it set the scene for what we are reading today? Go over the “who, what, when, where, and how” of Acts 19:21-41.
- Does the biblical text say how Paul receives this guidance from the Spirit? How might he have received such guidance, based on his history? How do you receive guidance from the Holy Spirit? Talk about the ways you most commonly experience this guidance.
- What is the allure of going to Rome with the gospel? Where would we go today to accomplish the same thing?
- How is Demetrius not just an interested, objective bystander, but someone with “skin in the game”? What is his perspective, as his comments illustrate?
- Give at least one example of a vested interest in a community, town, city, nation, or culture that attempted to block Christian proclamation, witness, and ethics. Your example can be either large or small, either historical or contemporary. Discuss how and why this vested interest fought against Christian faith and practice, and how Christians responded.
- Historically, money and power have been considered two of the three most dangerous temptations for all desiring to follow Jesus. How do you struggle with and seek to overcome the temptations associated with money and power? In a faith community, how do we help each other to withstand these temptations?

Acts 20:1-12, “Ministry in Macedonia, Greece, and Troas”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 20:1-12 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 19:21-41 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss Paul’s travels and team in Acts 20:1-6 [10 minutes].

- Paul goes to Macedonia after the riot in Ephesus
- What does he do? Gives to them “much encouragement” (Acts 20:2, ESV), from Greek word “parakaleo,” meaning both “to comfort” and “to exhort”
- He goes then to Greece, and then back to Troas, making a circuit through Macedonia and Greece (“Achaia”)
- Note the variety of people and provinces represented in Paul’s team from travels thus far; note no representatives from Corinth (no surprise, given Paul’s complex relationship with the church)
- Why is it significant that Paul had team members from many of the churches he helped to start? What does it say about Paul’s leadership style and emphases? How can we learn from Paul?
- When have you received encouragement from someone that comforted you? When have you received encouragement that led you to act?

4. Discuss the early church’s pattern of worship from Acts 20:7-8 [10 minutes].

- Already the pattern to gather on the “first day of the week” to hear the Word and break the bread
- Hearing someone teach/preach borrowed from the synagogue; observing the Lord’s Supper is new for Christians but already part of the template
- Liturgy of “Word and Sacrament” continued to this day in most Christian circles, whether both Word and Sacrament every Sunday, or just Word every Sunday and Sacrament on occasion
- Someone explaining the meaning and implication of a biblical passage has been part of biblically based worship from the beginning of Christian worship. How does this weekly gathering develop disciples of Jesus? What other practices help to form mature followers of Christ?
- Presbyterians usually do not celebrate the Lord’s Supper weekly, unlike Catholics and Episcopalians, but often more often than some Baptists and non-denominational congregations. What are the advantages and disadvantages of our “middle of the road” tradition?

5. Discuss Paul’s miracle in his ministry in Acts 20:9-12 (15 minutes).

- Late hour and duration of meeting brings fatigue and danger to Eutychus, young man probably in his 20s sitting at third-floor window; name means “good

- fortune” (aside: old joke about lost three-legged, one-eyed, mangy dog that answers to “Lucky”)
- Eutychus falls and apparently dies... prototype for anyone sitting through a sermon
 - But wait: Paul restores him, then returns upstairs for more preaching and communion
 - Group returns to worship; extraordinary service lasting until morning
 - Unlike Paul’s multi-hour sermon, many American churches prefer 15-20 minute sermons. Why? What about culture, history, and circumstances makes such sermon length the norm? Evaluate and reflect upon our preference for such sermons.
 - What hints do we get about Paul’s ability as a preacher, not only in this passage but in other New Testament writings? Define and describe preaching that captures and keeps your attention.

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 20:1-12 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 19:21-41 briefly. How does the rioting in Ephesus set up what we are reading? What is the “who, what, when, where, and how” of Acts 20:1-12?
- Why is it significant that Paul had team members from many of the churches he helped to start? What does it say about Paul’s leadership style and emphases? How can we learn from Paul?
- When have you received encouragement from someone that comforted you? When have you received encouragement that led you to act?
- Someone explaining the meaning and implication of a biblical passage has been part of biblically based worship from the beginning of Christian worship. How does this weekly gathering develop disciples of Jesus? What other practices help to form mature followers of Christ?
- Presbyterians usually do not celebrate the Lord’s Supper weekly, unlike Catholics and Episcopalians, but often more often than some Baptists and non-denominational congregations. What are the advantages and disadvantages of our “middle of the road” tradition?
- Unlike Paul’s multi-hour sermon, many American churches prefer 15-20 minute sermons. Why? What about culture, history, and circumstances makes such sermon length the norm? Evaluate and reflect upon our preference for such sermons.
- What hints do we get about Paul’s ability as a preacher, not only in this passage but in other New Testament writings? Define and describe preaching that captures and keeps your attention.

Acts 20:13-38, “Paul with the Ephesian Elders”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 20:13-38 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 20:1-12 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the connection between Paul and the Ephesians elders in Acts 20:13-17 [10 minutes].

- Paul furiously traveling to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost
- But stops in Miletus, not far from Ephesus, and asks to meet with the Ephesian elders
- “Miletus serves as a sort of compromise between Paul’s pastoral concern for the Ephesus church and his purpose in traveling quickly to Jerusalem: while he could not spare the time he anticipated that a full visit to Ephesus would entail, he fulfilled the longing and calling of his pastoral heart by arranging a meeting with the Ephesian elders.” (William Larkin, *Acts: Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, 573)
- What prior events and future concerns in Ephesus might motivate Paul to spend time with the Ephesian elders, despite his pressing desire to reach Jerusalem?
- When have you been motivated to change your schedule radically in order to see or talk with someone? What higher concerns overrode your scheduling worries? How might your experience help you better understand Paul and the Ephesian elders?

4. Discuss Paul’s address to the elders in Acts 20:18-35 [20 minutes].

- Paul highlights his candor as he tells “one message for Jews and Greeks alike: the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:21, NLT)
- Discusses his work, then drops a bombshell: he knows he will never see them again
- Notes his faithfulness to ministry with them; spent three years with them and invested in them
- Reveals that hard times will come to the church, especially in deviations from the gospel in false teaching (see this time described in his last New Testament writings: 1 and 2 Timothy)
- Ends by entrusting them to God’s care and quoting Jesus with words not found in the Gospels: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:34, NLT)
- What is the one message Paul states is at the center of his ministry in Ephesus? Why is this message so important even today? Why is this message so troublesome for many in our time?

- How did Paul model Christian witness and service for the Ephesians? What can they learn from his example? What can we learn?
- Paul is greatly concerned about future false teaching in the Ephesian church, and the congregation's later experience shows his concern is well-founded. Why does false teaching apparently not worry us to such an extent? What does our often blasé response to what Christianity has traditionally called heresy show us about our own faith and practice?

5. Discuss Paul's farewell in Acts 20:36-38 (5 minutes).

- Paul finishes speaking with them, and they all kneel in prayer
- An emotional time of saying goodbye, especially because "he had said that they would never see him again" (20:38, NLT)
- Imagine and describe what you think is going through Paul's mind and the Ephesian elders' minds as they say goodbye. How does Christian hope speak to this situation?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 20:13-38 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 20:1-12 briefly. How does it set up what we are reading today? Share the "who, what, when, where, and how" of Acts 20:13-38.
- What prior events and future concerns in Ephesus might motivate Paul to spend time with the Ephesian elders, despite his pressing desire to reach Jerusalem?
- When have you been motivated to change your schedule radically in order to see or talk with someone? What higher concerns overrode your scheduling worries? How might your experience help you better understand Paul and the Ephesian elders?
- What is the one message Paul states is at the center of his ministry in Ephesus? Why is this message so important even today? Why is this message so troublesome for many in our time?
- How did Paul model Christian witness and service for the Ephesians? What can they learn from his example? What can we learn?
- Paul is greatly concerned about future false teaching in the Ephesian church, and the congregation's later experience shows his concern is well-founded. Why does false teaching apparently not worry us to such an extent? What does our often blasé response to what Christianity has traditionally called heresy show us about our own faith and practice?
- Imagine and describe what you think is going through Paul's mind and the Ephesian elders' minds as they say goodbye. How does Christian hope speak to this situation?

Acts 21:1-14, “3rd Missionary Journey Ends; Paul Goes to Jerusalem”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 21:1-14 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 20:13-38 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss Paul’s journey to Tyre in Acts 20:1-6 [5 minutes].

- Primarily sea travel to Syrian province of Phoenicia, 400+ miles away
- Stay with congregation in Tyre for a week; probably came into being with exodus from Jerusalem after Stephen’s martyrdom
- Prophecy by Christians to Paul: do not go to Jerusalem
- Response? “When we returned to the ship at the end of the week” (20:5, NLT)
- A theme is developing about Paul’s future treatment in Jerusalem and beyond. How will this be important to Acts’s as stated by Jesus in Acts 1:8?

4. Discuss Paul’s trip to Ptolemais and Caesarea in Acts 20:7-9 [10 minutes].

- Short 27-mile trip to Ptolemais, then Caesarea (port built by Herod the Great)
- Reappearance: Philip “the Evangelist,” one of initial 7 deacons, noted for his missionary work in Samaria and with the Ethiopian eunuch, based in Caesarea
- Daughters all have the gift of prophecy (unmarried probably because of age)
- Look back on Philip’s prior work as a missionary in Acts 8:4-12,26-40. What stands out to you as you review it? Why is the Christian church different today because of Philip’s work?
- It seems Philip finished one season of ministry in Acts 8 and now is in a different season in Caesarea in Acts 20. Have you experienced the ending of one season of service that then led into a different service? How did you see God working?

5. Discuss Agabus’ prophecy regarding Paul in Acts 20:10-14 (20 minutes).

- In a very Old Testament type enactment of prophecy, Agabus takes Paul’s belt and binds himself with it, saying this shows how Paul will be treated in Jerusalem and beyond
- Much urging of Paul not to go to Jerusalem by both the team (“we”) and the local believers
- Paul refuses their counsel, stating he’s ready to be jailed and to die for Jesus
- Agabus’ prophetic action communicates strongly to the gathered believers in Caesarea? How does the action mesh with the message? How has God used a combination of means to communicate with you in the past?
- Look in Hosea 1, Ezekiel 37, Amos 7, and Jeremiah 13 for vivid examples of God using objects and events to communicate to His prophets. Pick one that stands out to you and describe it to the group.

- The Heidelberg Catechism begins: “What is your only comfort, in life and in death? That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. At the cost of his own blood he has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil. He protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head. Indeed, everything must fit his purpose for my salvation...” How might this confessional statement describe Paul’s faith as shown in this passage? How do you struggle with such an expression of faith in your life? How might you draw from it what you need to face your own set of challenges?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 21:1-14 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 20:13-38 briefly. How does it lead into what we are reading today? Tell briefly the “who, what, when, where, and how” of Acts 21:1-14.
- A theme is developing in Acts 21 about Paul’s future treatment in Jerusalem and beyond. How will this be important to Acts’s plot as stated by Jesus in Acts 1:8?
- Look back on Philip’s prior work as a missionary in Acts 8:4-12,26-40. What stands out to you as you review it? Why is the Christian church different today because of Philip’s work?
- It seems Philip finished one season of ministry in Acts 8 and now is in a different season in Caesarea in Acts 20. Have you experienced the ending of one season of service that then led into a different service? How did you see God working?
- Agabus’ prophetic action communicates strongly to the gathered believers in Caesarea? How does the action mesh with the message? How has God used a combination of means to communicate with you in the past?
- Look in Hosea 1, Ezekiel 37, Amos 7, and Jeremiah 13 for vivid examples of God using objects and events to communicate through His prophets. Pick one that stands out to you and describe it to the group.
- The Heidelberg Catechism begins: *“What is your only comfort, in life and in death? That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. At the cost of his own blood he has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil. He protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head. Indeed, everything must fit his purpose for my salvation...”* How might this confessional statement describe Paul’s faith as shown in this passage? How do you struggle with such an expression of faith in your life? How might you draw from it what you need to face your own set of challenges?

Acts 21:15-36, “Trouble in Jerusalem”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 21:15-36 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 21:1-14 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss Paul’s reception in Jerusalem in Acts 21:15-20a [10 minutes].

- Sixty-mile journey from Caesarea to Jerusalem
- Warmly received at first at Mnason’s home (from Cyprus originally; an early believer)
- Taken to James and the Jerusalem church’s elders the next day, where Paul tells of his work with the Gentiles; leaders praise God, but the other shoe is about to drop
- Review Acts 15 and the carefully negotiated agreement found there. How has the situation changed in Jerusalem? Why do you think this is happening? How are the elders responding?
- Remember when you attended a meeting you knew in advance would be contentious. What was your frame of mind beforehand? How did you prepare? How did things go? What did you learn from your experience?

4. Discuss the plan for Paul to counter the rumors in Acts 21:20b-26 [20 minutes].

- Problem: rumors throughout Jerusalem that Paul is teaching Jews (not just Gentiles) to forego the law, such as no circumcision; many scholars debate just how unified the church is at this time
- Plan from Jerusalem leaders: sponsor four men finishing a Nazirite vow, go with them to the Temple, and join their purification ceremony for seven days, paying expenses
- Not going back on agreement for Gentile ministry from chapter 15
- “The elders’ concern about the impact of Paul’s arrival (21:22) and the remedy they prescribed (21:23-24) point to a probable fracturing of the church: (1) the leaders (some Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christians and Hellenistic Jewish Christians) siding with Paul, and (2) that larger segment, Pharisaic Hebrew-speaking Christians, siding against him.” (William Larkin, *Acts: Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, 586)
- The Jerusalem elders appear to be between a rock and hard place. What do you think of their suggested solution to Paul? What are its assets and liabilities? What should they have done instead?
- Why are “church fights” so vicious? What does our dissension show a watching world?
- Christianity’s struggles with nationalism and ethnicity are not merely a first-century phenomenon. Today in our country and other countries, how have

national and ethnic allegiances obstructed our proclaiming and living the good news of Jesus? How can we work against such denials of the gospel call to go to all nations (Matthew 28:16-20)?

5. Discuss how things fall apart in Acts 21:27-36 (5 minutes).

- Jews from province of Asia, where Paul conducted much evangelism among the Gentiles, grab Paul and proclaim his heresy against Judaism
- Note rumor is inaccurate (Paul does not bring Gentiles into the Temple, for instance)
- Roman soldiers arrest Paul and take him away, followed by angry mob
- From this point on, the Jerusalem church's influence wanes dramatically.
- Rumors are often inaccurate. Why is this? What steps can we take to find out the best, most truthful information when we are in a troubling situation?

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 21:15-36 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 21:1-14 briefly. How does it lead to what we are reading today? State the “who, what, when, where, and how” of Acts 21:15-36.
- Review Acts 15 and the carefully negotiated agreement found there. How has the situation changed in Jerusalem? Why do you think this is happening? How are the elders responding?
- Remember when you attended a meeting you knew in advance would be contentious. What was your frame of mind beforehand? How did you prepare? How did things go? What did you learn from your experience?
- The Jerusalem elders appear to be between a rock and hard place. What do you think of their suggested solution to Paul? What are its assets and liabilities? What should they have done instead?
- Why are “church fights” so vicious? What does our dissension show a watching world?
- Christianity's struggles with nationalism and ethnicity are not merely a first-century phenomenon. Today in our country and other countries, how have national and ethnic allegiances obstructed our proclaiming and living the good news of Jesus? How can we work against such denials of the gospel call to go to all nations (Matthew 28:16-20)?
- Rumors are often inaccurate. Why is this? What steps can we take to find out the best, most truthful information when we are in a troubling situation?

Acts 21:37—22:23 - “Paul Speaks to the Crowd”

OUTLINE

I. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 21:37—22:23 [5 minutes].

II. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 21:15-36 [5 minutes].

III. Discuss Paul’s interaction with the Roman commander in Acts 21:37-40a [10 minutes].

- Paul surprises the Roman commander (“tribune” ESV) by speaking to him in Greek
- Commander is unsure of Paul’s identity: Egyptian who led a rebellion several years ago? No, says Paul, as he informs the commander of his citizenship and asks to speak to the crowd
- Commander grants permission; some commentators call this surprising
- Acts 21:37-40a reveals some of the characteristics that make Paul especially suited for cross-cultural ministry. What are they? What can we learn from Paul for our day?
- Talk about the unlikely interaction between Paul and the Roman commander. When has God unexpectedly brought someone into your life to provide you with help? Or, conversely, when have you unexpectedly provided assistance to someone? What does this say about God’s presence and power in our lives?

IV. Discuss Paul’s address in Acts 21:40b—22:21 [15 minutes].

- Paul now speaking to the crowd in Aramaic (polyglot: Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek)
- Note the different approach he uses when speaking with a Jewish audience
- Begins with words of affirmation for the crowd, then proceeds to tell his story
- Explains his history of being from Tarsus, yet having spent significant time in Jerusalem under Gamaliel’s tutelage
- Explains also how he was a persecutor of “the Way” (Acts 22:4, NLT)
- Gives his testimony of how he encountered the risen Christ twice: in Damascus (the famous account) and in the Temple during his first missionary visit to Jerusalem
- Surely his legacy as a strong Pharisee would help him! But his message will not be received well, especially the outreach to the Gentiles
- Outline Paul’s speech. How does he begin? Where is his focus? What does he choose not to say? How does his talk end? Why do you think Paul makes the choices he makes?
- Compare Paul’s speech to the Jerusalem crowd with his sermon in Athens in Acts 17. What is similar? What is different? How do people, context, and circumstances make a big difference?

- If a close friend asked you to share your personal story of God's work in your life today in five minutes or less, what would you say? How would you start? What would you emphasize? What would you omit? How would you conclude? (Extra credit: share your story with someone!)

V. Discuss the response to Paul's outreach in Acts 22:22-23 (10 minutes).

- Get the sense the crowd was at least partially with Paul until verse 21, "But then the Lord said to me, 'God, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles!'" (NLT)
- Then things fall apart, with a riot ensuing, with clothes and dust thrown
- Why do you think Paul's opponents are so opposed to reaching out to other peoples and cultures? What in the gospel message creates such opposition?

VI. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 21:37—22:23 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 21:15-36 briefly. How does this passage set up what we are reading today?
- What is the "who, what, when, where, and how" of Acts 21:37—22:23?
- Acts 21:37-40a reveals some of the characteristics that make Paul especially suited for cross-cultural ministry. What are they? What can we learn from Paul for our day?
- Talk about the unlikely interaction between Paul and the Roman commander. When has God unexpectedly brought someone into your life to provide you with help? Or, conversely, when have you unexpectedly provided assistance to someone? What does this say about God's presence and power in our lives?
- Outline Paul's speech. How does he begin? Where is his focus? What does he choose not to say? How does his talk end? Why do you think Paul makes the choices he makes?
- Compare Paul's speech to the Jerusalem crowd with his sermon in Athens in Acts 17. What is similar? What is different? How do people, context, and circumstances make a big difference?
- If a close friend asked you to share your personal story of God's work in your life today in five minutes or less, what would you say? How would you start? What would you emphasize? What would you omit? How would you conclude? (Extra credit: share your story with someone!)
- Why do you think Paul's opponents are so opposed to reaching out to other peoples and cultures? What in the gospel message creates such opposition?

Acts 22:24–23:11, “Paul at the High Council”

OUTLINE

I. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 22:24–23:11 [5 minutes].

II. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 21:37–22:23 [5 minutes].

III. Discuss Paul’s revelation of his Roman citizenship in Acts 22:24-29 [10 minutes].

- Commander (“tribune” ESV) at the end of his rope, so orders Paul to be beaten to extract more information
- Good time for Paul to reveal his Roman citizenship
- Capital offense to claim citizenship falsely; Paul may have carried documents with him
- Commander purchased his citizenship, while Paul born into his: shows Paul is of higher social status than the commander, and thus commander more likely to face consequences
- In addition to not receiving a flogging, what other advantages may Paul’s Roman citizenship provide him in this situation? How might these advantages help Paul in his witness? What advantages do you possess that you may use for the spread of the gospel?
- Paul is a person of two distinct cultures. One can argue he is not fully a part of either one. What challenges and joys does Paul encounter as a result? How do these challenges and joys inform you on how we may conduct cross-cultural ministry today?

IV. Discuss Paul’s confrontation with the Sanhedrin in Acts 22:30–23:10 [15 minutes].

- Paul released (he is a citizen after all) and then accompanied by commander to a meeting with members of the Sanhedrin, the 71 elders, teachers of religious law, and priests who collectively govern much of Israel’s life
- Paul speaks, then he is upbraided by high priest; exchange continues until Paul apologizes
- Strategy: aligns himself with Pharisees (pro-resurrection, angels, etc.) against Sadducees (anti-resurrection, angels, etc.) both to make clear to Jews Paul’s previous statements about the uniqueness of Jesus and to define for Romans the true nature of the dispute about Jesus
- What are some subtle clues in Acts 22 and 23 that the dynamic has changed between the commander and Paul? Why might this be important for Paul a little further down the road?
- Given the shared belief with Pharisees about resurrection, why do you think few of them come to see Jesus as the Messiah? What people today appear to

resonate with much of Christianity, yet reject Jesus as Lord? Why? How can we witness best to such people today?

V. Discuss God's private encouragement of Paul in Acts 23:11 (10 minutes).

- Paul returned to barracks for protection as dispute grows more and more violent
- In need of some encouragement; receives it through a vision
- Both present and future circumstances receive God's blessing as Paul moves toward Rome
- Many think Christians should not ever go through trying experiences, and if we do, then it is an indication we have done something wrong. Others say no one should ever go through trying experiences, and if we do, then it is a sign God is either non-existent, indifferent, or evil. How does Acts 23:11 help us here? What other Scriptures would you reflect upon?

VI. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 22:24—23:11 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 21:37—22:23 briefly. How does it set up what we are reading today? Share the "who, what, when, where, and how" of Acts 22:24—23:11.
- In addition to not receiving a flogging, what other advantages may Paul's Roman citizenship provide him in this situation? How might these advantages help Paul in his witness? What advantages do you possess that you may use for the spread of the gospel?
- Paul is a person of two distinct cultures. One can argue he is not fully a part of either one. What challenges and joys does Paul encounter as a result? How do these challenges and joys inform you on how we may conduct cross-cultural ministry today?
- What are some subtle clues in Acts 22 and 23 that the dynamic has changed between the commander and Paul? Why might this be important for Paul a little further down the road?
- Given the shared belief with Pharisees about resurrection, why do you think few of them come to see Jesus as the Messiah? What people today appear to resonate with much of Christianity, yet reject Jesus as Lord? Why? How can we witness best to such people today?
- Many think Christians should not ever go through trying experiences, and if we do, then it is an indication we have done something wrong. Others say no one should ever go through trying experiences, and if we do, then it is a sign God is either non-existent, indifferent, or evil. How does Acts 23:11 help us here? What other Scriptures would you reflect upon?

Acts 23:12-35 - “The Plot to Kill Paul”

OUTLINE

I. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 23:12-35 [5 minutes].

II. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 22:24—23:11 [5 minutes].

III. Discuss the plot against Paul in Acts 23:12-15 [15 minutes].

- Group of 40+ Jewish men vow neither to eat nor drink until they have killed Paul
- Connected to belief that Paul has desecrated Temple with ministry to Gentiles
- Involvement of some Sanhedrin members (“leading priests and elders” in verse 14)
- Plan? Under guise of bringing Paul back to the Sanhedrin, ambush and kill him
- In Acts 23:12-15, vows to God are used as a means for evil. How may vows to God instead be powerful tools for Christian growth and maturity?
- How does Acts 23:12-15 illustrate the lengths to which some people will go to oppose the Christian faith? Where are places today in which this level of opposition is taking place? How can you support Christians in these places?
- Some people in our day say that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, spawns incredible hatred and cruelty. How might you respond to such claims?

IV. Discuss the providential action taken in Acts 23:16-24 [15 minutes].

- Paul with some freedom in troop barracks as Roman citizen in protective custody
- Nephew probably in early 20s (based on Greek for young man used here) hears of plot
- Nephew tells Paul, who tells soldier to take nephew to see commander (“tribune” ESV)
- Fruit of changed dynamic mentioned in previous passage; commander takes news seriously
- “Thus, the uncovering of the murderous plot against Paul shows that God’s providential ruling and overruling in the affairs of humankind is more than enough to thwart dedicated and deceptive conspiracy, especially when courageous and discerning humans do their part” (William Larkin, *Acts: Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, 605).
- Put yourself in the shoes of Paul’s nephew. What fears do you have to overcome before going to the Roman troop barracks? What motivates you to take such steps?
- Help for Paul comes from an unexpected source in Acts 23:16 and following. When have you received help from a source you would have never anticipated?

Upon reflection, how did you see God at work through this support? How has this experience prepared you for future challenges?

- Often Scripture helps us to better interpret Scripture. So read Romans 5:3-5 in a translation of your choice. How does Romans 5:3-5 speak to what is happening in our passage?

V. Discuss the journey to Caesarea in Acts 23:25-35 (5 minutes).

- Commander writes letter to governor Felix in Caesarea at Herod's old palace
- Commander doesn't mention he nearly whips Paul, but otherwise accurate; sympathetic to Paul's case, stating the charge is "certainly nothing worthy of imprisonment or death"
- Felix is governor from A.D. 52-59; originally a slave but emancipated by royal prerogative; governorship noted by cruelty and brutality
- Perhaps wanted to avoid the situation for political reasons in 23:34-35, but Paul's home province of Cilicia being in Felix's jurisdiction seals the deal; Paul under house arrest

VI. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 23:12-35 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 22:24—23:11 briefly. How does it lead into what we are reading today? Tell briefly the "who, what, when, where, and how" of Acts 23:12-35.
- In Acts 23:12-15, vows to God are used as a means for evil. How may vows to God instead be powerful tools for Christian growth and maturity?
- How does Acts 23:12-15 illustrate the lengths to which some people will go to oppose the Christian faith? Where are places today in which this level of opposition is taking place? How can you support Christians in these places?
- Some people in our day say that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, spawns incredible hatred and cruelty. How might you respond to such claims?
- Put yourself in the shoes of Paul's nephew. What fears do you have to overcome before going to the Roman troop barracks? What motivates you to take such steps?
- Help for Paul comes from an unexpected source in Acts 23:16 and following. When have you received help from a source you would have never anticipated? Upon reflection, how did you see God at work through this support? How has this experience prepared you for future challenges?
- Often Scripture helps us to better interpret Scripture. So read Romans 5:3-5 in a translation of your choice. How does Romans 5:3-5 speak to what is happening in our passage?

Acts 24:1-27 - “Paul and Felix”

OUTLINE

I. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 24:1-27 [5 minutes].

II. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 23:12-35 [5 minutes].

III. Discuss the case against Paul argued by Tertullus in Acts 24:1-9 [10 minutes].

- Felix is Roman governor, and Tertullus is spokesperson for Sanhedrin
- Summary: Paul is a troublemaker, stirring up problems among Jews all over the world
- “Ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (24:5, ESV) and attempted to profane the Temple
- Longer reading in part of verse 6, all of verse 7, and beginning of verse 8 not among best and earliest manuscripts, and thus omitted in most translations and found only in footnotes
- Tertullus’ argument short on substance, long on accusation
- Summarize the argument against Paul and Christianity here in verses 1-9. How do contemporary arguments against Christian faith sometimes parallel Tertullus?
- At times, those who make harsh statements against Christianity have been hurt in some way by Christians. Think of a time this has occurred in your experience. How may we respond?

IV. Discuss Paul’s response to the charges in Acts 24:10-21 [15 minutes].

- Paul denies stirring up crowds in the Temple or Jerusalem in general; no proof exists
- Admits he is part of “the Way,” not a cult but faithful to the teachings of Judaism
- Refers yet again to the importance of the resurrection as common ground between Christianity and the Pharisees
- In Jerusalem to worship and to present offerings to God; accusers from Asia not present
- Complaint against him needs to be specific so he can respond in detail
- Describe in some detail Paul’s reply to Tertullus and the Jewish leaders. What does he focus on? What does he not cover? Why do you think Paul makes the choices he makes?
- The resurrection is central to Christian faith and practice. Why is it so important? What is Christianity like without the resurrection of Jesus?

V. Discuss Felix’s actions for and against Paul in Acts 24:22-27 (10 minutes).

- Felix knowledgeable about Christianity, according to verse 22

- Plays for time and waits for Lysias (tribune who wrote him and led Paul out of Jerusalem)
- Some liberty and visitation permitted while Paul waits
- Felix and wife hears Paul again, but Paul offends with talk on righteousness and judgment
- Holds Paul indefinitely, hoping for a bribe; continues to talk with Paul over two-year period
- Felix removed by Rome for cause (according to historian Josephus); leaves Paul in prison hoping for Jewish favor
- Do you think Paul have said what he said to Felix and Drusilla about “righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment”? When is it appropriate to hold back in our comments to others? When is it appropriate to “let it rip”?
- Paul was in limbo for two years. When things don’t work out the way we want them to, how do we maintain our hope? How may God use these times?

VI. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 24:1-27 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 23:12-35 briefly. How does this passage set up what we are reading today? What is the “who, what, when, where, and how” of Acts 24:1-27?
- Summarize the argument against Paul and Christianity here in verses 1-9. How do contemporary arguments against Christian faith sometimes parallel Tertullus?
- At times, those who make harsh statements against Christianity have been hurt in some way by Christians. Think of a time this has occurred in your experience. How may we respond?
- Describe in some detail Paul’s reply to Tertullus and the Jewish leaders. What does he focus on? What does he not cover? Why do you think Paul makes the choices he makes?
- The resurrection is central to Christian faith and practice. Why is it so important? What is Christianity like without the resurrection of Jesus?
- Do you think Paul have said what he said to Felix and Drusilla about “righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment”? When is it appropriate to hold back in our comments to others? When is it appropriate to “let it rip”?
- Paul was in limbo for two years. When things don’t work out the way we want them to, how do we maintain our hope? How may God use these times?

Acts 25:1-22, “Paul and Festus”

OUTLINE

I. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 25:1-22 [5 minutes].

II. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 24:1-27 [5 minutes].

III. Discuss yet another plot against Paul as Festus takes over in Acts 25:1-5 [10 minutes].

- Festus arrives in the province and goes from Caesarea to Jerusalem on fact-finding and get-acquainted tour; Sanhedrin asks for Paul to be sent to Jerusalem
- Why? Plan to assassinate Paul en route (harkens back to Acts 23)
- Festus: Going to Caesarea shortly, and he will interview Paul then; send representatives to bring charges against Paul
- Yet another conspiracy to take Paul's life! How does he keep his faith in the midst of such tribulation? What lessons may we learn from Paul's example?
- The New Testament mentions repeatedly that suffering for following Jesus is the lot of the typical Christian. While today we suffer in various ways, most of us do not suffer specifically for our faith. Why do you think this is the case? What are we missing in our lives as a result?

IV. Discuss Paul's interview with Festus in Acts 25:6-12 [10 minutes].

- Upon arrival in Caesarea, Festus calls for Paul
- Jerusalem delegation presents charges “that they could not prove” (24:7, ESV)
- Paul's defense: he has not transgressed any law of Jews, Temple, or Rome
- Festus, wanting to show favor to the Jews (would help him politically as he administers the province), asks Paul if he will go to Jerusalem
- Paul: standing before Caesar's court, and trial through Rome is my choice
- Appeal to Caesar is Roman citizen's right; Festus, talking to advisors, agrees
- Luke in Acts repeatedly describes the charges against Paul as baseless. Why do you think Luke takes such pains to do so? How might things be different if there were legitimate reasons to bring Paul to justice?
- Why would Paul choose a Roman court versus a Jerusalem court? What advantages are there in Roman jurisdiction for Paul, especially regarding his long-term goals?

V. Discuss Festus and Agrippa's interaction on Paul in Acts 25:13-22 (15 minutes).

- Agrippa II is great-grandson of Herod the Great (see Matthew 1), with authority in Jewish religious life (right to appoint high priest, for example); last of the Herodian line

- Bernice is Agrippa's sister; rumored Bernice and Agrippa in incestuous affair; may have just served as royal consort for Agrippa, but rumors pervasive
- Festus lays out summary of case against Paul: 1) not what I first expected; 2) disputes within the Jewish religion, especially over Jesus who was dead and is claimed to be alive now; 3) appeal to Caesar rather than to Jerusalem, so in my jurisdiction
- Festus asks for counsel as he writes his report to Rome to send with Paul; Agrippa agrees
- Now that you know some of the "back story" of Agrippa and Bernice, does it change your opinion on Festus' decision to seek Agrippa's help? Can either Festus or Agrippa be truly impartial? Can anyone today be truly impartial when it comes to Jesus? Why or why not?
- How does Festus minimize Jesus' resurrection as he talks with Agrippa? How do people today minimize the significance of the resurrection? What kinds of religion do we create without the reality of the risen Jesus?

VI. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 25:1-22 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 24:1-27 briefly. How does it lead into what we are reading today? What is the basic "plot" of Acts 25:1-22?
- Yet another conspiracy to take Paul's life! How does he keep his faith in the midst of such tribulation? What lessons may we learn from Paul's example?
- The New Testament mentions repeatedly that suffering for following Jesus is the lot of the typical Christian. While today we suffer in various ways, most of us do not suffer specifically for our faith. Why do you think this is the case? What are we missing in our lives as a result?
- Luke in Acts repeatedly describes the charges against Paul as baseless. Why do you think Luke takes such pains to do so? How might things be different if there were legitimate reasons to bring Paul to justice?
- Why would Paul choose a Roman court versus a Jerusalem court? What advantages are there in Roman jurisdiction for Paul, especially regarding his long-term goals?
- Now that you know some of the "back story" of Agrippa and Bernice, does it change your opinion on Festus' decision to seek Agrippa's help? Can either Festus or Agrippa be truly impartial? Can anyone today be truly impartial when it comes to Jesus? Why or why not?
- How does Festus minimize Jesus' resurrection as he talks with Agrippa? How do people today minimize the significance of the resurrection? What kinds of religion do we create without the reality of the risen Jesus?

Acts 25:23—26:32, “Paul and Agrippa”

OUTLINE

I. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 25:23—26:32 [5 minutes].

II. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 25:1-22 [5 minutes].

III. Discuss Festus’ introduction of Paul’s case in Acts 25:23—26:3 [10 minutes].

- Agrippa and Bernice enter with royal ceremony, then Festus kicks off the proceedings, noting Paul has raised the ire of Jews all over
- Jews want Paul’s execution, but Festus states officially he’s heard nothing worthy of death
- Intent is to send Paul to Rome, but what to write? Invites Agrippa to examine
- Agrippa’s understanding of Jewish life and belief sets tone for Paul’s remarks
- How will Agrippa’s familiarity with Jewish life and belief will guide Paul’s defense? How might Paul target his remarks if he was speaking directly to Festus, for example?
- How should we tailor our comments about Jesus to the person with whom we are speaking? What needs to stay the same, regardless of our audience?

IV. Discuss Paul’s defense in Acts 26:4-23 [10 minutes].

- Starts with testimony of life as Pharisee (“strictest party,” 26:5, ESV)
- As such, strongly opposed to Christianity, and endeavored to capture, imprison, and execute Christians in both Jerusalem and foreign cities
- Describes his encounter with the risen Jesus on the way to Damascus (see Acts 9) that also serves to describe his calling from Jesus as a witness to the Gentiles
- Witnesses near and far about the Good News, framing it in the teachings of the Old Testament that the Christ would suffer, rise from the dead, and bring light to the Gentiles
- Paul talks about his life as a Pharisee and persecutor of Christians in vv. 4-11? When we tell our stories, how much space should we give to the “before” part?
- Paul tells the story of his conversion to Christ in verses 12-18. What does he emphasize about his experience and the words of the risen Jesus to him? Why?
- In verses 22-23, Paul summarizes both the gospel and his particular calling. What would both Jews and Gentiles find problematic in this summary, especially about Jesus? What do people in our day find problematic in this summary, and why? How do we respond to their skepticism and “the scandal of the cross”? (Review 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5 for additional help here.)

V. Discuss the responses to Paul in Acts 26:24-32 (15 minutes).

- Festus breaks in, exclaims that Paul has been driven out of his mind by learning
- Paul retorts: responding rationally and reasonably about events of public record

- Paul then puts the ball in Agrippa's court: "Do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe" (26:27, ESV)
- Agrippa's reply debated: 1) Close to belief: "You almost persuade me to become a Christian" (NKJV), or, 2) Ironical or embarrassed response: "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to become a Christian?" (NIV); more interpreters lean toward option #2
- When the proceeding is over, Agrippa, Bernice, Festus, and others declare Paul has done nothing to deserve death; freed if not appealed to Caesar
- Like Festus, some opponents of the gospel today say Christianity is irrational. How may we respond to such accusations? How is Christianity reasonable?
- Like Agrippa, others look with disdain upon the call to follow Jesus Christ as Lord for reasons other than Christianity's irrationality. What are some of these reasons? How may we respond to these reasons, and to those who give them?

VI. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 25:23—26:32 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 25:1-22 briefly. How does it segue into what we are reading today? Unpack briefly the "who, what, when, where, and how" of Acts 25:23—26:32.
- How will Agrippa's familiarity with Jewish life and belief will guide Paul's defense? How might Paul target his remarks if he was speaking directly to Festus, for example?
- How should we tailor our comments about Jesus to the person with whom we are speaking? What needs to stay the same, regardless of our audience?
- Paul talks about his life as a Pharisee and persecutor of Christians in vv. 4-11? When we tell our stories, how much space should we give to the "before" part?
- Paul tells the story of his conversion to Christ in verses 12-18. What does he emphasize about his experience and the words of the risen Jesus to him? Why?
- In verses 22-23, Paul summarizes both the gospel and his particular calling. What would both Jews and Gentiles find problematic in this summary, especially about Jesus? What do people in our day find problematic in this summary, and why? How do we respond to their skepticism and "the scandal of the cross"? (Review 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5 for additional help here.)
- Like Festus, some opponents of the gospel today say Christianity is irrational. How may we respond to such accusations? How is Christianity reasonable?
- Like Agrippa, others look with disdain upon the call to follow Jesus Christ as Lord for reasons other than Christianity's irrationality. What are some of these reasons? How may we respond to these reasons, and to those who give them?

Acts 27:1-26, “Paul Sails for Rome”

OUTLINE

I. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 27:1-26 [5 minutes].

II. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 25:23—26:32 [5 minutes].

III. Discuss Paul and his entourage sailing for Rome in Acts 27:1-12 [10 minutes].

- Paul and others in the keeping of the centurion (captain) Julius of the Augustan or Imperial Cohort; “we” language denotes that Luke accompanies Paul
- Scheduled for stops along the way as route goes north of Cyprus (as shield against wind)
- In Myra, the group changes to a ship bound for Italy; make it as far as Crete and Fair Havens
- Rough weather throughout voyage due to the time of year
- Paul warns them not to sail further, but centurion listens to the ship captain and ship owner
- Paul does not go to Rome alone, but with friends. Who would walk with you when you are in a crisis? What do you need him/her to do?
- Greed may motivate the ship captain and ship owner in verse 11. When have you made a decision with less than the best motives? How did things turn out? Besides “everything,” what would you do differently next time?

IV. Discuss the voyage and storm in Acts 27:13-20 [15 minutes].

- Sail along coast of Crete, but then a “northeaster” wind keeps them from making shore
- Storm continues as ship sails on protected side of small island, Cauda (also Claudia)
- But storm drives ship along and takes ship out in the open ocean
- Take steps to protect the ship, but goes for naught; throw equipment, cargo overboard
- “The terrible storm raged for many days, blotting out the sun and the stars, until at last all hope was gone” (27:20, NLT)
- Put in your own words how the passage describes things completely falling apart for the sailors and passengers on board. Just how desperate were they, and why?
- When have you been in a dire situation where it seemed “all hope was gone”? How did you make it through? What did you gain from your experience?

V. Discuss Paul’s encouragement in Acts 27:21-26 (10 minutes).

- Paul addresses the crew after no one had eaten for many days (Seasickness? Food thrown overboard?)

- Paul's beginning remarks sound a little like "I told you so," but he means to establish his authority to speak
- Paul reassures people in a vision he received that day (different from the vision in Acts 23:11), God wants him to stand before Caesar in Rome, and there will be no loss of life on the ship
- "And behold, and God has granted you all those who sail with you" (27:24, ESV)
- But ship will run aground on an island first
- In the midst of a difficult time in your life, have you ever received encouragement that can only be described as having its source in God? What was it? Share it with the group or class.
- How has this encouragement from God shaped your life afterward, especially in subsequent times of distress?

VI. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 27:1-26 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 25:23—26:32 briefly. How does it inform what we are reading today?
- Describe briefly the plot of Acts 27:1-26.
- Paul does not go to Rome alone, but with friends. Who would walk with you when you are in a crisis? What do you need him/her to do?
- Greed may motivate the ship captain and ship owner in verse 11. When have you made a decision with less than the best motives? How did things turn out? Besides "everything," what would you do differently next time?
- Put in your own words how the passage describes things completely falling apart for the sailors and passengers on board. Just how desperate were they, and why?
- When have you been in a dire situation where it seemed "all hope was gone"? How did you make it through? What did you gain from your experience?
- In the midst of a difficult time in your life, have you ever received encouragement that can only be described as having its source in God? What was it? Share it with the group or class.
- How has this encouragement from God shaped your life afterward, especially in subsequent times of distress?

Acts 27:27-44, “Shipwreck”

OUTLINE

I. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 27:27-44 [5 minutes].

II. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 27:1-26 [5 minutes].

III. Discuss the first of three providential events of the shipwreck in Acts 27:27-32 [10 minutes].

- Ship being driven toward land against the rocks along the shore
- Sailors at their wits' end: put out anchors and wait for daylight
- With daylight, sailors attempt to abandon ship
- First providential event: Paul warns centurion and soldiers not to let the sailors leave, or else everyone will die; soldiers ropes to lifeboat cut and boat drifts away
- Why do you think the sailors' departure will lead to the deaths of everyone else on board? What is providential about Paul stepping up and warning to the soldiers?
- When in your life has a warning from someone you trusted kept you from calamity? Or conversely, when did you not pay attention to a warning you should have heeded? What lessons have you learned going forward?

IV. Discuss the second providential event of the shipwreck in Acts 27:33-37 [15 minutes].

- Paul encourages everyone to eat; reminds them of his earlier promise of God's care
- Second providential event: In words and actions reminiscent of communion, Paul takes bread, gives thanks to God, and eats
- Others follow his example and are strengthened
- How does God use Paul's words and actions to encourage the 276 people from the ship? What do you think of the possible connection to communion here? Why do you think Luke uses such language? How is communion a time of encouragement for you?
- How have you been unexpected encouraged by someone when you have found yourself at a low point? What form did this encouragement take? Who encouraged you? Was it someone you expected to be used by God to encourage you and why?

V. Discuss the third providential event of the shipwreck in Acts 27:38-44 (10 minutes).

- Not sure where they are, but recognize bay with a beach as a good location to move toward

- But make mistake; hit shoal and run aground; ship smashed by waves and breaking apart
- Third providential event: soldiers want to kill all prisoners so no one escapes, but commander respects Paul and wants to save him, so instead orders everyone to jump overboard and swim toward shore; everyone escapes safely
- Why would the Roman soldiers even think about killing all the prisoners at this stage? What was the soldiers' worry? The soldiers' fear?
- Paul seems to be unaware of the soldiers' intentions regarding the prisoners. Has there been a time when God acted providentially for your benefit in a situation that would have been disastrous if God had not acted, and you only found about it much, much later? How did your discovery make you feel?

VI. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 27:27-44 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 27:1-26 briefly. How does it lead into what we are reading today? How does Acts 27:27-44 flow or move?
- Why do you think the sailors' departure will lead to the deaths of everyone else on board? What is providential about Paul stepping up and warning to the soldiers?
- When in your life has a warning from someone you trusted kept you from calamity? Or conversely, when did you not pay attention to a warning you should have heeded? What lessons have you learned going forward?
- How does God use Paul's words and actions to encourage the 276 people from the ship? What do you think of the possible connection to communion here? Why do you think Luke uses such language? How is communion a time of encouragement for you?
- How have you been unexpected encouraged by someone when you have found yourself at a low point? What form did this encouragement take? Who encouraged you? Was it someone you expected to be used by God to encourage you and why?
- Why would the Roman soldiers even think about killing all the prisoners at this stage? What was the soldiers' worry? The soldiers' fear?
- Paul seems to be unaware of the soldiers' intentions regarding the prisoners. Has there been a time when God acted providentially for your benefit in a situation that would have been disastrous if God had not acted, and you only found about it much, much later? How did your discovery make you feel?

Acts 28:1-16, “Ministry in Malta and Rome”

OUTLINE

I. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 28:1-16 [5 minutes].

II. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 27:27-44 [5 minutes].

III. Discuss the miracle on Malta in Acts 28:1-6 [10 minutes].

- Discover the bay with beach is the island of Malta; people are welcoming and gracious
- Snake comes out of fire on beach and bites Paul; islanders believe Paul getting what he deserves from “goddess Justice” (28:4, NIV) as criminal who should have died in shipwreck
- But Paul shakes off snake and remains unharmed
- After long period of time, opinion changes; Paul considered a god (re: Acts 14 and the people of Lystra)
- We can be quick to say things like “what goes around, comes around,” especially when bad events happen to other people. How are first impressions sometimes misleading when it comes to what is truly happening in others’ lives? How can we start to see people as God sees them?
- How is Paul’s response to the proclamation of his godhood by the people on Malta apparently much different from when the people of Lystra did much the same thing in Acts 14? What do you think accounts for the difference?

IV. Discuss Paul’s ministry in Malta in Acts 28:7-10 [10 minutes].

- Publius, leading official of Malta, welcomes Paul and friends to his estate
- Paul heals Publius’ father, sick from fever and dysentery
- This miracle and relationship opens the door to ministry, as many are healed
- “They honored us in many ways; and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed.” (28:10, NIV)
- Why would Publius invite Paul and his team to his estate? What does Paul’s healing of Publius’ father lead to on the island of Malta? Why do you think this miracle’s impact is so profound?
- How do relationships sometimes open the door for ministry in your life? Please share an example.

V. Discuss Paul’s arrival in Rome in Acts 28:11-16 (15 minutes).

- Told that Paul and his team stay on Malta for three months before sailing away
- Make several stops along the way along the coast
- Christians from Rome meet Paul and his team at the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns

- In Rome, Paul allowed to live in private lodging but with a guard as he waits for his appeal
- As Paul draws closer to Rome, who greets him and his team? What significance do you see in the makeup of his reception party?
- Paul is on the threshold of achieving a long sought after goal in his ministry. How do you feel when you are at such a threshold moment in your life either professionally, personally, or spiritually? Describe both the positives and the negatives that come your way during such a momentous time in your life.

VI. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 28:1-16 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 27:27-44 briefly. How does it segue into what we are reading today? Unpack briefly the “who, what, when, where, and how” of Acts 28:1-16.
- We can be quick to say things like “what goes around, comes around,” especially when bad events happen to other people. How are first impressions sometimes misleading when it comes to what is truly happening in others’ lives? How can we start to see people as God sees them?
- How is Paul’s response to the proclamation of his godhood by the people on Malta apparently much different from when the people of Lystra did much the same thing in Acts 14? What do you think accounts for the difference?
- Why would Publius invite Paul and his team to his estate? What does Paul’s healing of Publius’ father lead to on the island of Malta? Why do you think this miracle’s impact is so profound?
- How do relationships sometimes open the door for ministry in your life? Please share an example.
- As Paul draws closer to Rome, who greets him and his team? What significance do you see in the makeup of his reception party?
- Paul is on the threshold of achieving a long sought after goal in his ministry. How do you feel when you are at such a threshold moment in your life either professionally, personally, or spiritually? Describe both the positives and the negatives that come your way during such a momentous time in your life.

Acts 28:17-31, “Paul Preaches in Rome”

OUTLINE

I. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Acts 28:17-31 [5 minutes].

II. Remind the class of the discussion from Acts 28:1-16 [5 minutes].

III. Discuss Paul’s request to meet with the Roman Jewish leaders in Acts 28:17-22 [10 minutes].

- Three days after arriving, Paul calls together gathering of local Jewish leaders
- Rome has thriving Jewish community of approximately 40-50K during the middle of the first century AD
- Paul tells a little of his story for the purpose of setting a date for a greater telling
- Also attempting to find what has been told them by Jews in Jerusalem or Asia
- Not bringing charges against his people; in Rome for “the hope of Israel” (v. 20, NIV)
- Leaders have not heard from others; want his thoughts on “sect” of Christianity
- Why does Paul wants to meet with the Jewish leaders in Rome so soon after arriving? What does he hope to gain? To tell? To share? Why do the Jewish leaders want to speak with Paul?
- Were you surprised to discover Rome’s Jewish community had not received negative communications regarding Paul, especially given all that had occurred earlier in Acts? What might explain this apparent disconnect?

IV. Discuss the meeting between Paul and the Jewish leaders in Acts 28:23-28 [15 minutes].

- Agree to meet in larger numbers at Paul’s house
- Paul unpacks Old Testament witness from morning to evening about Jesus Kingdom; “Some were convinced... but others would not believe” (28:24, NIV)
- Disagreement among Jewish as Paul sends them off with Isaiah 6:9-10 (Greek version), emphasizing the closed-mindedness of many to the gospel
- The Old Testament is Paul’s focus as he talks with the Jewish leaders. Be honest: how well do you know the Old Testament, especially as it relates to the gospel? Choose one Old Testament story, person, or event that shares the gospel well and describe why.
- It is common for people to disagree on the meaning of Jesus for their lives. Paul quotes Isaiah 9 to the Jewish leaders. How do we respond, in a loving yet challenging way, when someone we know states that he or she doesn’t see Jesus the way we do?

V. Discuss Paul’s ministry in Rome as Acts concludes in Acts 28:30-31 (10 minutes).

- Summary of next two years: proclaims Kingdom and teaches Jesus boldly
- “We cannot be sure of what Paul did after the events described in Acts. Tradition affirms that he was released from this imprisonment, had more evangelistic campaigns, and probably visited friends in Macedonia and Asia. Did he go to Spain during this time, as he had wished to (Rom. 15:24, 28)? We cannot be sure. Paul was probably arrested again and wrote the Pastoral Letters during his second imprisonment in Rome. The last of these, 2 Timothy, speaks of his impending death. He was martyred some time between A.D. 64 and 67.” (Ajith Fernando, *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary*, 626)
- How does your life revolve around the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ? What gives evidence in your daily life?
- Pick out a person in your orbit who needs to hear about the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Commit to pray for this person and to ask for God to lead you into a way to share these two things with him or her.

VI. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your group with prayer, read Acts 28:17-31 and discuss the following:

- Review Acts 28:1-16 briefly. How does it inform what we are reading today? Describe briefly the plot or flow of Acts 28:17-31.
- Why does Paul want to meet with the Jewish leaders in Rome so soon after arriving? What does he hope to gain? To tell? To share? Why do the Jewish leaders want to speak with Paul?
- Were you surprised to discover Rome’s Jewish community had not received negative communications regarding Paul, especially given all that had occurred earlier in Acts? What might explain this apparent disconnect?
- The Old Testament is Paul’s focus as he talks with the Jewish leaders. Be honest: how well do you know the Old Testament, especially as it relates to the gospel? Choose one Old Testament story, person, or event that shares the gospel well and describe why.
- It is common for people to disagree on the meaning of Jesus for their lives. Paul quotes Isaiah 9 to the Jewish leaders. How do we respond, in a loving yet challenging way, when someone we know states that he or she doesn’t see Jesus the way we do?
- How does your life revolve around the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ? What gives evidence in your daily life?
- Pick out a person in your orbit who needs to hear about the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Commit to pray for this person and to ask for God to lead you into a way to share these two with him or her.