

From Easter to Pentecost and Beyond: A Church-Wide Study in the Book of Acts

Clarksville First United Methodist Church
April 8 — May 12, 2020
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Week 4 Gospel to the Gentiles Continues Wednesday, April 29

Introduction

The attention in the book of Acts has shifted entirely to the ministry of Paul. With the exception of the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15, chapters 13-28 center on the ministry of Paul. Even the Council stems from Paul's ministry to the gentiles, whose relationship to Judaism needed definition by the leaders of the church there.

Paul has completed what we call his first and second missionary journeys. He went with Barnabas to Cyprus and to Asia Minor on his first journey. He went with Silas and Timothy to Asia Minor and Greece, revisiting early established churches in modern Turkey before crossing the strait into Europe and starting new churches. This week, his third missionary journey is primarily structured to return to those churches, strengthening and guiding them as apostle.

We can notice an itinerant ministry by Paul, similar to Wesley in England, and also like Asbury and Coker in America. He travels from place to place preaching the gospel. He relies on his hosts for a measure of support, while also working as tentmaker to support his ministry. There is a level of faith even in Paul's own missions, both in reliance on other Christians and in reliance on God when he is persecuted.

Questions

A student of Acts asked this week, "If the apostles were filled with the Spirit at Pentecost (ch.2), why are they filled again in Acts 4:31?" This could mean either (a) Christians should experience multiple fillings or (b) Luke is identifying the source of their power by reminding readers that they *were filled* at Pentecost. Some charismatic Christians believe (a) and less charismatic Christians believe (b).

Thanks for asking!

Reading

Acts 18 - 23



Quiz

After you have read the chapters, if you want to engage in a self-assessment—a quiz over the reading—it's here as an option for you. The questions might include important facts or trivial facts from the reading. The answers are at the end of this module under the title, "Answers to the Quiz."

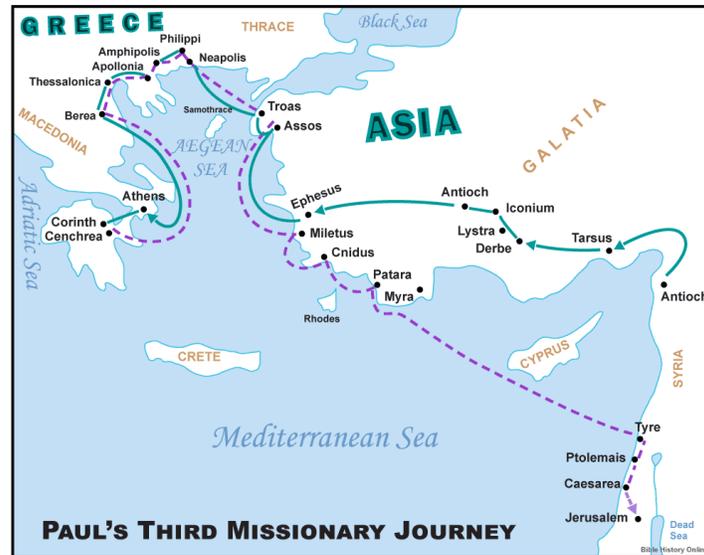
1. What is the name of the preacher who was called "an eloquent man and mighty in the scriptures" that came to Ephesus?
 2. Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila encountered Christians who did not know Jesus' baptism in the spirit, but they were only familiar with what?
 3. What physical objects of Paul did God use to heal people?
 4. What city held a temple to Diana whose patrons were angry that Paul preached against their patron goddess?
 5. What name is given to the movement of Christianity in the book of Acts?
 6. What city did Paul bypass on his return trip, but welcomed the elders from that city for a final exhortation?
 7. What did the sons of Sceva try to perfume that got them into physical and spiritual trouble?
 8. What is the name of the high priest to whom Paul declares, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!"?
 9. Of which religious order among the Jews did Paul belong, when he was still called Saul?
 10. Who is the governor in Caesarea that hears Paul defend himself against accusations of unlawful behavior?
- Bonus: In advance of next week's reading, in what city does church tradition say Paul would die?

Overview of section

Our last section ended with Paul landing in Antioch to end his second missionary journey. Within one verse, Luke presents him as ready to return to those churches, "Strengthening all the disciples" (18:23).

Chapter 18

The narrative begins in Ephesus without Paul and with the mention of one Apollos, who is "an eloquent man and mighty in the scriptures" who "spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord" (vv.24-25). In an interesting profile, Apollos is preaching Jesus but only knows of John the Baptist's baptism in water for repentance. He does not know baptism in Jesus' name and he does not know about Pentecost and the baptism of the Spirit. It is the disciples of Paul, Priscilla and Aquila, who disciple him more deeply. Notice how Paul's disciples are now making disciples. Apollos "vigorously refuted the Jews publicly" (v.28) using scripture. He goes on to Corinth (19:1) when Paul returns to the narrative in Apollos recent footsteps.



Chapter 19

Paul lands in Ephesus to begin the story of his third missionary journey. Like Apollos, believers there “have not as much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit” (v.2), but only know John’s baptism. They were baptized in Jesus’ name and received the Holy Spirit (vv.5-6). When these twelve participate in baptism by water, baptism in the Spirit, and exhibit miraculous gifts, they are demonstrating how the experience of the apostles is available to all believers. On one hand, they it looks like a formula for all Christians. On the other hand, there are many believers who are not mentioned as displaying miraculous gifts on conversion. Pentecostal and charismatic Christians use passages like this to expect all new Christians to speak in tongues. Yet, Acts does not suggest that this is a requirement and it is a time of special manifestations of signs and wonders. Their exhibition of tongues does function to show the powerful work of the Spirit there and to show that genuineness of their conversion here.

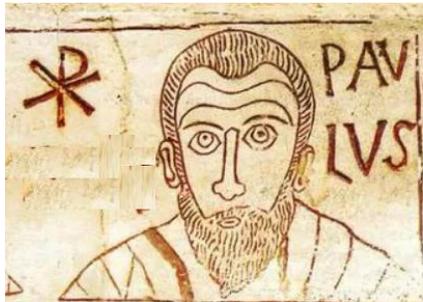
Paul stays in Ephesus for two years. He “spoke boldly” in the synagogue for three months, “reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God” (v.8). He moved out among the gentiles alongside continued engagement with Jews, “so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (v.10).

God used various types of miracles during this time both to demonstrate the power of the faith and to assist those in need. Paul’s healing hands led to faith around his very clothes as sources of power and God used them (v.11). We should be careful thinking that everything in Acts is normative for the Christian life, although another curriculum writer or Acts reader will disagree. I would advise you to be suspicious if a prayer mat from an evangelist comes in the mail and you should place your hands on it and transfer your hands on to someone for healing. This happens. Personally, I think we should see this particular act as unique to this specific time and not normative for our faith. But others can disagree.

One thing is for sure, this led some to engage in spiritual activities beyond their capabilities. Some Jewish exorcists, the sons of Sceva the Jewish chief priest, commanded demons “by the Jesus whom Paul preaches” (v.13). The demon answered, “Jesus I know and Paul I know, but who are you?” (v.15). The demonized man then attacked them, leading them to flee bruised and naked. This frightened the Jews in the region and led to their repentance with belief in Jesus. Magicians were among those repenting (v.19).

When Paul sends Timothy and Erastus ahead to Macedonia, the complexity of Paul's ministry is illustrated. There are new disciples who are now engaging the same ministry without the apostle being present. He seems to trust these disciples in their own ministry.

The ancient city of Ephesus held one of the 7 Wonders of the Ancient World, the Temple of Diana. This goddess of war was worshiped as Artemis in the Greek pantheon of gods and Diana in the Roman pantheon of gods. Besides the pagan hope in this goddess to bless their city, the temple provided a lucrative trade among the silversmiths who would fashion and sell trinkets and paraphernalia related to the cult. Demetrius the silversmith was among those angry at Paul for preaching against any god except



Jesus. He called together the guild and remarked, "Not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship" (v.27). They worked up a great crowd who seized Gaius and Aristarchus, two of Paul's Macedonian disciples. The city clerk calms the crowd and defends Paul as engaging in nothing illegal unless it can be proved in court. This is the second time a local, pagan authority has protected Paul using social justice. Paul in Corinth, ch.18, was the other time in the study from last week.

Chapter 20

Paul crosses over and travels through Macedonia without a mentioned incident. Going south into Greece, he stays for three months without cities named. He returns by land back through Macedonia and Asia, because "the Jews plotted against him as he was about to sail to Syria" (v.3). One Sunday morning, as "the disciples came together to break bread" (v.7), Paul preached into the night. Eutychus was a young man sitting in the window, listening to the sermon when he falls asleep. He fell three stories to his seeming death. Paul went down, embraced him, and healed him. While this could be a lesson in not falling asleep during the sermon, we don't need to apply this to our lives because we would never let that happen in Pastor Keith's sermons. No, not us.

Paul hopes to return to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Pentecost (v.16). He chose to bypass Ephesus, but when he landed nearby in Miletus, he called for Ephesian elders to come to him. The apostle provides a tender charge to this church leaders, "You know...I always lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews" (vv.18-19). Now, he explains, "I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happened to me there" (v.22). This is reminiscent of Jesus' only journey and instructions to his followers in Matthew 16:21: "From then onwards Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he was destined to go to Jerusalem and suffer grievously at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes." He exhorts them in the faith, kneels down to pray with them, weeps, and says good-bye. In this explanation, Paul provides one of the few quotes by Jesus outside the gospels: "It is more blessed to

give than to receive” (v.35).

Here we get an indicator that Paul anticipates his own life will be coming to an end. It will be years before he dies, but his ministry will no longer be as itinerant and free as it was before. While this is a sad episode to read, Paul also has a sense of commitment and necessity to serve God this way.

There is a long list of individuals around the ministry of Paul named in this chapter. Sopater, Aristarchus, Secudus, Gaius, Timothy, Tychicus, and Trophimus are among those listed. We recognize that the ministry of Paul is expanding, and this ministry team is only a representation of the large number of disciples made along the way.



Chapter 21

Returning by way of Cyprus, where they did not stop, they landed at Tyre on the coast of Syria, on the path to Antioch. Disciples there warned him “by the Spirit” not to go up to Jerusalem (v.4). We do not interpret their instruction to be a command of God as much as a warning by God. Paul will go to Jerusalem, but it will lead to his imprisonment and physical punishment.

They come to the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven deacons. He had four daughters who prophesied, a testimony to an early Christian family. The prophet Agabus appears again, as he came down from Jerusalem a second time to prophesy (Acts 11:27). Last time, he foretold of a famine that would enable Paul and Barnabas to collect support funding for the believers in Judea. This time, he prophesies by the Holy Spirit as he binds Paul’s hands with his own belt, “So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the gentiles” (v.11). Luke includes himself among those who heard this prophecy and who wept. When Paul told them they should not be saddened but that he was ready to do the Lord’s will through captivity, “We ceased, saying, ‘The will of the Lord be done’” (v.14).

They arrive in Jerusalem, welcomed by the brethren there, surely including the other apostles. James hears from Paul about the conversion of so many, especially the gentiles. Paul hears from James how zealous Jews have been accusing him of “forsaking the law of Moses” (v.21). To demonstrate that the apostle to the gentiles did honor the Jewish covenant—simply not requiring circumcision for salvation—Paul joins four others taking the Nazarite vow (Num. 6:2-8) according to the Law. By doing this, he shows public honor to the law and even reinforces Jesus’ teaching from the law. Yet, he can still maintain his freedom from requirement of circumcision for gentiles who convert to the faith.

It does not stop the zealous Jews, however, who invent the charge of “bringing gentiles into the temple and defiling the holy place” (v.28), which the assumed took place just because Trophimus the Ephesian had been seen with him in the city (v.29). They seized Paul and dragged him from the temple. The commander of the garrison came to stop the uproar, “they stopped the Jews from beating Paul” (v.32). As the guard took him away, he revealed that he assumed Paul was the Egyptian who led a rebellion of four thousand in the wilderness. The extensive assumptions around Paul’s arrest evidence his innocence. He declares himself “a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city,” whereby he claims his legal rights as a Roman citizen. Roman law provided “rights and privileges including a fair

public trial for a citizen accused of any crime, exemption from certain ignominious forms of punishment, and protection against summary execution.” (F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 39).

Chapter 22

One can easily lose track in Acts of who Paul is addressing and who is accusing him. “The Jews” becomes the group descriptor for them. In this case, it is individuals associated with the temple: some zealous individuals, some religious leaders, and probably just some easily persuadable followers. To this crowd, he particularly provides the chapter of his life when he was a zealous Jew, persecuting Christians like they are doing to him. “I am a Jew....brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel” (v.3). Paul was a Pharisee who studied under the notable scholar who had taught among them. The same Gamaliel had warned the religious leaders in Acts 5:34 to beware persecuting Peter and the other apostles, as it was



possible their message could be from God. Paul describes how he was zealous, stood as Stephen was stoned, and hunted Christians with letters of approval from some of the same leaders in the audience. They would not be convinced, however, rending their clothes and throwing dirt in the air. The commander of the guard ordered Paul to be scourged, when Paul called for his legal rights: “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?” (v. 25). The commander became afraid then, for he had already bound Paul and intended to whip him against the law.

When the apostle is placed before the chief priests and the religious council, it was for the commander to understand the accusation better. Paul then gives a sermon to some of the highest ranking officers in Judaism.

Chapter 23

The Jewish Council called the Sanhedrin and the religious leaders in Jerusalem were comprised of two parties. The Sadducees were more closely attuned to the political rulers, while the Pharisees sought to walk among the regular citizens of Jews more. The Sadducees adhered to the Old Testament Law, while playing down the Old Testament prophets and writings; the Pharisees adhered to all of the Old Testament equally and valued later, oral rabbinical laws as equally compelling authorities. Most importantly for our story, the Sadducees did not maintain a resurrection or angels because they were not contained in the Torah (the first five OT books) while the Pharisees did maintain an afterlife and the presence of angels. Paul likely knows that any testimony that he gives will be received without respect by the Sanhedrin. He had given his testimony to many of them days earlier. In a moment of illumination, “when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees,” he only had to mention the resurrection and they argued among themselves. The commander of the guard had to pull Paul out of the fray “lest he might be pulled to pieces by them” (v.10). The Lord himself spoke to him that night in prison: “Be of good cheer, Paul” (v.11). Paul heard then that he would bear witness to Christ in Rome.

In a rare moment of scripture when a figure has received so much attention a family member of the person appears who had not been mentioned. Paul has a sister (v.16) whose son heard about an ambush scheduled against Paul. Some among the religious leaders pretended to invite Paul to court again, but a group of assassins planned to attack and kill him on the way. When Paul’s nephew heard, he was taken to the commander with the insight, who in turn prepared to send Paul to Felix the regional governor instead. This was an act of protection to Paul, and the letter from the commander to Felix was

fair: “I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death and chains” (v.29). The chapter closes with Paul shipped to Caesarea, where his Roman citizen status and the mercy of the governor allowed him to be kept safely in his headquarters.

So, this section ends with Paul on trial for Jewish heresy, which likely would not normally result in incarceration or death. As with Jesus and James, however, we see that anything can happen. Paul has the assurance of Christ himself, though, that Rome is in store for this apostle.

Commentary

- 18:24-25—Apollos is introduced as a new character in a story filled with false teachers who make the gospel a Jewish works theology. There are also sorcerers like Simon Magus and Elymas who compete with the preaching of the gospel. Luke seems to take special care to present this new figure as one who is aligned with the apostles’ teaching, even though he is one encountered as a convert. The church is emerging beyond the apostles and true gospel is being preached.
- 18:28—In the second century, Christians would find themselves having to defend the faith that was growing in the Roman Empire. These writers would use philosophy and logic to Romans who considered themselves keenly philosophical and logical. These writers would come to be known as apologists, or defenders of the faith. Here, Apollos in the first in the bible named as defending the faith from the scriptures.
- 19:9—Notice the term both Luke and these early Christians used for the faith: “The Way.”
- 19:21—Paul mentions his intention to see Rome in a prophetic manner. This foreshadowing his next missionary journey.
- 19:23—The term “The Way” is used for the third time.
- 19:24—Since I like to weave in CFUMC members to the study, parishioner Kent Rothwell has a dog named Artemis. Her canine companion is her male named after another Greek god, Apollo. This has nothing to do with Acts.
- 19:29 and 20:1, 4—The Macedonian Christian named Aristarchus would be with Paul in his Roman imprisonment, mentioned in Colossians 4:10.
- 20:1, 4—Tychichus would be named by Paul as a faithful disciple in Ephesians 6:21-22, Colossians 4:7-9, and 2 Timothy 4:12, and he seems to be involved in the case of Onesimus, for whom Paul writes the letter of Philemon in his defense.
- 20:5-15—This is the second time the author of Acts speaks as a member of the travelling party but saying, “We...” The first occasion was when Paul first went to Macedonia in 16:10. Luke’s advanced Greek skills lead scholars to believe that he is from Macedonia where these references take place, perhaps the city of Philippi.
- 20:17-38—The episode between Paul and the Ephesian elders is tender. The apostle is a pastor to these pastors, a shepherd to their spiritual and leadership development. Their tears climax the scene to show their mutual care for one another.
- 21:14—Although Luke and other disciples quit weeping and declared “The Lord’s will be done” with Paul’s expected imprisonment, note the difficulty with they accepted this. “When we would not be persuaded” means they could not give up the sadness of potentially losing Paul to death. It was hard for them and we can be encouraged by their acceptance of this difficult reality.

- 21:18—James, the half-brother of Jesus, first emerged as a leader at the Council of Jerusalem in ch.15 and he would continue to serve as a leader there.
- 21:40—Paul speaks in Hebrew to the crowd of Jerusalem, offering a measure of credibility about his Jewish heritage and a strategic connection to the Jewish audience. This is affirmed when “they kept all the more silent” to hear their own language (22:2).
- 22:18-21—When Jesus had called Paul years earlier and when the future apostle came to Jerusalem, Christians were afraid of him as their great persecutor. Ananias pointed this out (9:13) and the apostles mentioned the same (9:26). In this testimony, we hear Paul predicting those same emotions with perhaps a sense of guilt for his zeal. This is the first time we see Paul’s humanity during those early years of belief.
- 23:2-5—A similar situation took place with Jesus at his trial before the Sanhedrin in John 18:22-23. The high priest struck him then and the Council members accused him of speaking ill against the high priest (Exodus 22:28).
- 23:29—Not only did the issue of the resurrection divide Paul’s accusers on the Sanhedrin, but the Pharisees framed their accusation against Paul but also against the Sadducees by professing a belief in angels, to the anger of any Sadducee who would hear it.

Application

- Do we ever get more upset that we should about the exchange of ideas? The apostle encounters a range of persecution. The first and common persecution is the tumultuous responses to his message, when the high priest tears his clothes in frustration and crowd yells. How much are we like them?
- Do you ever wish that Jesus would just tell you what to do, like when he told Paul to go to Jerusalem? If our lives should look like the lives of the individual Christians in Acts, why don’t we hear the message more clearly? The opposite question is deserving: do we sometimes claim a decision “God-revealed” when really it’s our own decision and we marshal God’s support?
- If God has all power to cause or prevent things, why does he let Paul suffer so much? Why do we proudly say, “God came through in the end” when He could have come through in the beginning?
- The Jews are scandalized by Paul’s teaching that the Jewish law need not be followed by Christian converts, especially gentiles. However, he also encouraged the practices for Jews without requiring them. Did you find that to be a mixed message in Acts?



Further Application

- When is it right to quit a movement and quit resisting? When is it better to stay in a movement and resist? Although Paul and the Jews refuse to quit their cause, might there be times when we change denominations or local churches because we don’t share the views in place? This question is before us as United Methodists these years.
- The Jews are scandalized by Paul’s teaching that the Jewish law need not be followed by Christian converts, especially gentiles. They consistently got angry. Have you ever felt

scandalized by a new movement in the life of the church? In the end, did that movement continue to divide you from others or did it eventually settle into a new way of doing things?

Answers to the Quiz

1. Apollos (18:24)
2. John the Baptist's water repentance (19:5)
3. Handkerchiefs and aprons (19:12)
4. Ephesus (19:24, 26)
5. The Way (19:9, 23)
6. Ephesus (20:17)
7. An exorcism in Jesus and Paul's names (21:14-16)
8. Ananias (23:2-3)
9. Pharisees (23:6)
10. Felix (23:24)

Bonus: Rome