

# OUR MISSION

Group Leader's Guide

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## ABOUT THIS STUDY

Kenneth Schenck's book, *Our Mission*, draws us back to the dynamic early days of the church. Our risen Lord met with his disciples and promised the Holy Spirit would soon mold them into Jesus' powerful witnesses. Their witness would begin in Jerusalem and then expand to Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. Schenck tracks this powerful witness from the church's founding to its launching of worldwide missions (Acts 13–28).

You and your group will discover numerous lessons about personal spiritual growth and church dynamics as you study *Our Mission*. Serving as Jesus' witnesses was not an easy assignment in the first century, nor is it any easier today. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit empowered the early church, and his power is still available.

## THE GENTILE MISSION BEGINS

Acts 13:1–15:35

### TO THE FACILITATOR

Welcome everyone to this first session. Let everyone know you want each session to be informal and helpful. Explain that you value input and a casual atmosphere. Tell the group this first session zeroes-in on the church's official start of its mission to Gentiles.

### FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

The Antioch church generously released two of its prominent teachers, Saul and Barnabas, to be missionaries. Of course, prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit had led the church to this decision (Acts 13:1–3).

The missionaries' first stop was the Island of Cyprus, where Saul struck a sorcerer, Elymas, blind because he tried to keep the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, from hearing God's Word. The miracle persuaded the proconsul to believe (vv. 4–12).

At this point, Saul took on the Roman name Paul, and he and Barnabas headed north to what is modern-day Turkey, but their young coworker, John Mark, left them and returned home. At Antioch, a Roman city in Pisidia, the missionaries entered a synagogue, where Paul rehearsed Israel's history and proclaimed Jesus crucified, buried, and risen in fulfillment of prophecy. After his discourse, many believed in Jesus. The next Sabbath almost the whole city assembled to hear God's Word, but angry, jealous Jews opposed the missionaries. Paul and Barnabas rebuked the Jews, and announced they would henceforth turn to the Gentiles. This statement pleased the Gentiles and opened the way for many in the region to believe. However, the Jews stirred up trouble for Paul and Barnabas, who subsequently went to Iconium (vv. 13–52).

At first, Paul and Barnabas's preaching and miracles brought mixed results. Some sided with the irate Jews; others sided with the missionaries. Hearing about a plot against them, the missionaries moved on to Lystra and Derbe, where they shared the gospel (Acts 14:1–7).

The healing of a lame man at Lystra caused a crowd to perceive Paul and Barnabas as gods, but the two restrained the crowd from worshiping them. The arrival of Jews from Iconium quickly changed the mood of the crowd from adulation to antagonism. The crowd dragged Paul out of the city, stoned him, and left him for dead. However, the disciples circled Paul; he revived, and went back into the city.

The next day, Paul and Barnabas left Lystra for Derbe before returning to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, where they encouraged the believers. Finally, they returned to their home base, Antioch, and reported about God's great work among the Gentiles (vv. 8–28).

Judaizers, those who believed Gentiles could not be saved apart from circumcision and observing the law of Moses, contended with Paul and Barnabas. The issue became the reason a council of churches convened at Jerusalem. When Paul and Barnabas and several other believers told the council about God saving Gentiles during their mission trips, the apostle James advised the council to send a letter to the Gentile churches. The council would not impose Jewish rites on them (Acts 15:1–29). The believers at Antioch rejoiced when the letter reached them (vv. 30–35).

## FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How would you react if two key Bible teachers in your church resigned to become foreign missionaries?
2. How might your church set a climate that is favorable to the calling of young people to serve as missionaries?
3. How do the Scriptures play an essential role in preparing hearts for the gospel?
4. Why do you agree or disagree that we do not truly share the gospel unless we include the fact that Jesus rose from the dead?
5. How do you explain the sudden change of attitude toward Paul and Barnabas that the people of Lystra demonstrated? What similar change of attitude have you witnessed?
6. What opposition, if any, have you received when you shared the gospel? How did you respond?
7. Why is it important to strengthen and encourage new believers? How might you accomplish this?
8. In your opinion, why do some people insist on adding a list of must-dos to the gospel?
9. Read Galatians 2:1–5. What strategy did Paul embrace when he went to Jerusalem for the council meeting?

## WRAP-UP

Encourage the group members to write at least one letter of encouragement to a missionary this week. Challenge everyone to increase his or her giving to missions and to look for opportunities to share the gospel with people from other countries.

## THE GOSPEL REACHES GREECE

Acts 15:36–17:34

### TO THE FACILITATOR

Ask whether members of the group have always seen eye to eye with their fellow Christians. Explain that this session reports a parting of the ways for Barnabas and Paul over a difference of opinion. Nevertheless, the gospel advanced and reached into Greece.

### FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

When Paul suggested to Barnabas that they return to the places they had evangelized, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along, but Paul disagreed. The disagreement was sharp and led to a split between the two. Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and traveled through Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:36–41).

Later, Paul revisited Derbe and Lystra, where he added young Timothy to his team. The missionary team continued their journey through Asia Minor until Paul received a vision at night, in which a man implored him to come to Macedonia. Soon the team entered Philippi, a chief city in Macedonia (Acts 16:1–12).

On the Sabbath, they located a group of women who were praying at the riverside. The Lord opened the heart of Lydia, a businesswoman, who listened to the gospel, believed, and was baptized along with her household. She promptly invited the team to stay at her house (vv. 13–15).

Trouble reached Paul and Silas, when Paul expelled a demon from a fortune-telling slave girl. Her masters stirred up a crowd that persuaded the city's judges to flog Paul and Silas and throw them into jail. However, at midnight, Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns. God responded with an earthquake that opened the cell doors. Paul was able to lead the jailer to Christ and to baptize him and his household. The following day, after receiving an apology from the judges, Paul and Silas encouraged the new believers and then left the city (vv. 16–40).

Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens were Paul's next stops. For three Sabbaths, he taught in the synagogue in Thessalonica with significant results. However, jealous Jews rounded up a mob that falsely accused Paul and his coworkers of treason (Acts 17:1–9).

Paul enjoyed a good reception in Berea, but angry Jews from Thessalonica arrived and stirred up a crowd. Believers escorted Paul to Athens, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea and waited for word from Paul to join him (vv. 10–15).

Paul found Athens full of idols as well as Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. Men of opposing philosophies argued with him, and then took him to address the city's council. Given an opportunity to explain his teaching, Paul presented truth about the living God and the fallacy of idols. He urged everyone to repent and declared coming judgment by the risen Lord. The audience was divided. Some believed; others jeered (vv. 16–34).

## FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Paul and Barnabas disagreed about John Mark. How do you explain the fact that godly believers occasionally have disagreements?
2. Acts makes no mention of Barnabas after he and Paul parted ways. Do you think this silence indicates Barnabas's decision about John Mark was wrong? Why or why not?
3. Paul wanted to push further into Asia, but God directed him to Europe. Has the Lord ever changed your plans? If so, how?
4. Why do you think Paul and Silas were so joyful in the Philippian jail? What reasons do you have to rejoice in tough times?
5. Why do you think Paul insisted on an apology from the political leaders in Philippi?
6. Why do you agree or disagree with Kenneth Schenck's observation: "Sometimes justice does prevail. Just as often, however, justice does not. As often as not in this world, the wicked prevail. God allows evil to win some of the battles" (*Our Mission*, pp. 34–35).
7. How can Christians be more like the Berean believers at church? In their personal lives?
8. Paul found evidence of widespread idolatry in Athens. What evidence of idolatry do you find in your community?
9. Why do you agree or disagree that so-called intellectuals are hard, but not impossible, to win to Christ?
10. When we share the gospel, should we warn people about the coming judgment? Why or why not?

## WRAP-UP

Ask volunteers to complete this statement, "We should not fear persecution because . . ."

## CORINTH AND EPHEBUS

Acts 18–19

### TO THE FACILITATOR

In this session, we learn how the gospel took root in two major cities: Corinth, a morally corrupt city; and Ephesus, an extremely idolatrous city. Tell the group that no community is too sinful for the gospel to penetrate and take root.

### FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Paul spent nearly two years in Corinth, where he stayed and worked with Aquila and Priscilla, a Jewish couple that had been expelled from Rome. The three worked as tentmakers (Acts 18:1–4).

Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul at Corinth, where Paul proclaimed the gospel to the Jews until they violently opposed him. He rebuked them and turned his attention to the Gentiles. Next door to the synagogue, the home of Titius Justus, served as a preaching station. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, his household, and many Corinthians believed and were baptized (vv. 5–8).

Encouraged in a vision to keep preaching, Paul continued for a year and a half. Finally, irate Jews took him to court on a false charge. However, Gallo the proconsul refused to hear the case and ejected the accusers from the court (vv. 9–17).

Finally, Paul left Corinth, and sailed with Priscilla and Aquila to Ephesus. After reasoning with the Jews there, he sailed away from Ephesus, but promised to return. His immediate destination was Antioch and other places throughout Galatia and Phrygia (vv. 18–23).

Meanwhile, Apollos, a highly educated Jew, taught about Jesus in Ephesus, but he taught only repentance and the baptism demanded by John the Baptist. Fortunately, Aquila and Priscilla disciplined him in the rest of the story of Jesus. Later, with the blessing of the Ephesian believers, Apollos went to Achaia, where he helped the believers there and refuted the Jews (vv. 24–28).

Back in Ephesus, Paul led a group of disciples into the full knowledge of Jesus and into the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit. Then he held discussion for two years in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. During that time, the gospel permeated the province of Asia, and many who were converted from black magic burned their witchcraft objects (Acts 19:1–22).

A riot broke out, sparked by Demetrius and other idol makers. They feared their business would end because of Paul's successful preaching. A rabble-rousing crowd seized two of Paul's traveling companions and dragged them before the authorities. However, the city clerk quieted and dismissed

the crowd. He noted that the riot might incur Rome's wrath, and he reminded everyone that there were courts where a disagreement could be settled legally (vv. 23–41).

## FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that Aquila and Priscilla modeled the ideal marriage?
2. Paul supported his ministry by making tents. How might a congregation free or guard a pastor's time for full-time ministry?
3. The Lord encouraged Paul to keep on speaking in Corinth. How has the Lord encouraged you to speak for him?
4. How can you and your fellow believers strengthen other Christians?
5. What do you like about Apollos? Why?
6. Why do you agree or disagree that some "businesses" would have to shut down if Christians engaged in a more active witness for Christ?
7. How might our nation's government threaten our Christian liberty? How might it defend it?
8. Do you think the adulation given to sports and entertainment personalities borders on idolatry or even qualifies as idolatry? Why or why not?
9. How can Christian parents best teach their children to worship God exclusively?

## WRAP-UP

Ask volunteers to identify some idols people worship today, such as money. Instruct everyone to memorize 1 John 5:21: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" because . . .

## THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

Acts 20–22

### TO THE FACILITATOR

How committed are we to God’s will? Are we ready to go anywhere he sends us—even if he sends us to a very dangerous place? Tell your group that the apostle Paul believed it was God’s will for him to venture to Jerusalem, where his life would be at serious risk. This session challenges our faith and obedience.

### FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

En route to Jerusalem, Paul was the target of a plot by some Jews, but close fellow believers helped him get to Troas (Acts 20:1–6).

At Troas a young man named Eutychus fell asleep at midnight as Paul talked on and on to believers gathered on Sunday on the third floor of a building. The young man fell from his window seat and died. However, Paul restored his life, and then went back upstairs and talked until daylight (vv. 7–12).

After Troas Paul sailed to Miletus, bypassing Ephesus because he wanted to get to Jerusalem as soon as possible. However, he summoned the elders of the church at Ephesus to meet him at Miletus. When they arrived, he shared his conviction that the Spirit compelled him to go to Jerusalem, where he did not know what would happen to him. He reviewed his faithful, three-year ministry among them, warned them about the emergence of false teachers, and charged them to shepherd God’s people. After speaking to the elders, he knelt with them and prayed. After a tearful farewell, the elders accompanied Paul to the ship (vv. 13–38).

As he drew closer to Jerusalem, Paul received warnings from the prophet Agabus that the Jews in Jerusalem would apprehend Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles, but Paul rejected the warning and traveled on to Jerusalem (Acts 21:1–15). On page 68 of *Our Mission*, Kenneth Schenck writes: “It almost feels like the Spirit was saying two things at once: go and don’t go. In the end, it seems like it was indeed God’s will that Paul move forward and embrace what lay ahead. The prophecies prepared him for a difficult time.” Indeed, the difficult times lay ahead.

In Jerusalem Paul joined in purification rites with believing Jews who had heard that he opposed the law of Moses. Later, some Jews from Asia sparked a citywide riot against Paul, but the Roman authorities rescued him and bound him with chains. Perhaps surprisingly, at the Roman soldiers’ barracks, Paul received permission to address the angry mob (vv. 17–40).

Speaking in Aramaic, Paul quieted the crowd, gave his biographical background, recounted his conversion to Christ, and told about his commission to the Gentiles (Acts 22:1–21). Upon hearing about Paul’s commission, the crowd shouted for his execution, whereupon the soldiers took him into the barracks and prepared to flog him. However, they held back when Paul declared he was a Roman-born citizen. The next day, the commander placed Paul before the Sanhedrin (vv. 22–30).

## FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that Paul went to Jerusalem by the will of God?
2. How do you explain the fact that godly believers sometimes disagree about what the Lord’s will is in spite of their believing the Spirit led them to their decision?
3. How might a churchgoer stay alert during a sermon that runs long?
4. What do you think it means to declare the whole will of God (Acts 20:27)?
5. Why do you agree or disagree that every believer will face opposition if he or she faithfully shares the gospel?
6. In what ways does Paul’s description of his ministry at Ephesus inspire you?
7. Why is the parting of a pastor from his congregation usually such a sad occasion?
8. Why do you think Paul submitted to Jewish purification rites?
9. Paul could speak Greek and Aramaic. Do you think a good education is helpful in the communication of the gospel? Why or why not?

## WRAP-UP

Have the class retell the sequence of events that took Paul from Ephesus to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Begin by asking an articulate group member to start retelling the events, beginning with Troas. Have that person name another person to continue as far as he or she wishes before designating another member to continue. The process continues until Paul stands before the Sanhedrin.

## WITNESS BEFORE RULERS

Acts 13–25

### TO THE FACILITATOR

Have volunteers tell about their witnessing experiences involving a high-ranking person; for example, a boss, celebrity, or government official. Explain that this session focuses on Paul's witnessing before rulers.

### FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Appearing before the Sanhedrin, which was a body of Pharisees and Sadducees, Paul identified himself as a Pharisee. He declared he believed in the resurrection. This statement stirred a heated dispute between the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection, and the Sadducees, who did not. The atmosphere became so charged that the Roman soldiers had to extricate Paul from the Sanhedrin and take him to the barracks (Acts 23:1–10). The following night, the Lord assured Paul he would testify in Rome (v. 11).

A band of forty Jewish men took an oath to kill Paul, but Paul's nephew learned of the plot and reported it to the Roman commander, who decided to provide a large military escort to take Paul to Governor Felix in Caesarea. A letter to the governor from the commander explained the reason for sending Paul to him. Felix agreed to hear Paul's case when his accusers arrived (vv. 11–35).

Five days later, Paul's accusers' lawyer brought unfounded charges against Paul, but Paul defended himself by confessing he was a follower of the Way, who believed in the Law and the Prophets and maintained hope in the resurrection. He claimed his conscience was clear, and explained his charitable mission to Jerusalem (Acts 24:1–21).

Felix adjourned the hearing, and ordered the centurion to keep Paul in custody but allow him some freedom and permit his friends to care for his needs (vv. 22–23).

Several days later, Felix and his wife sent for Paul, and heard his testimony and message. He hoped Paul would give him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently, but he left Paul in prison for two years as a favor to the Jews (vv. 24–27).

Festus, the next governor, met with Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, who requested that he transfer Paul there, where Paul's enemies were preparing an ambush. However, Festus invited the leaders to attend a hearing in Caesarea. Paul defended himself in court and requested a hearing before Caesar (Acts 25:1–11). Festus granted Paul's request (v. 12).

A few days later, King Agrippa and Queen Bernice visited Festus and voiced their interest in hearing Paul (vv. 13–22). The next day Festus brought Paul before the couple and admitted he could find nothing wrong that Paul had done. He planned to write a letter to Caesar and was hoping King Agrippa would find a charge against Paul that he could put in the letter (vv. 23–27).

## FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Kenneth Schenck claims in *Our Mission*, “Paul’s tactic of dividing and conquering the Sanhedrin was ingenious. Rather than fight a unified enemy, he got his enemies to fight among themselves” (p. 78). Why do you agree or disagree that Paul had purposely planned to divide the Sanhedrin?
2. How do you think those who deny the resurrection become ministers of churches today?
3. Just as religious men sought to kill Paul, so today certain religious zealots try to murder Christians. How do you account for such atrocities committed in the name of religion?
4. Read what Tertullus said about Paul at the hearing presided over by Felix (Acts 24:5). How would you refute the charges?
5. Do you believe today’s government is mainly for or against Christianity? Defend your answer.
6. What is your impression of Felix? Why do you have that impression of him?
7. Why do you think Felix and Festus wanted to please the Jews? Do you think our government leaders pass legislation that favors antichristian groups? Explain.
8. Why do you agree or disagree that Paul defended himself both respectfully and in a manner that was faithful to the gospel?
9. Do you think Christians should ridicule or insult a public official? Why or why not?

## WRAP-UP

Have the class identify a bill or law that is unbiblical and write letters to their elected officials asking for its repeal.

## THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Acts 26–28

### TO THE FACILITATOR

A changed life is one of the most convincing evidences that the gospel is true. Paul described his changed life when he appeared before Agrippa and Festus. Invite the group to “listen” carefully to Paul’s testimony.

### FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

In his defense before Agrippa, Bernice, and Festus, Paul complimented Agrippa on his keen knowledge of Jewish customs and controversies. He politely urged Agrippa to listen to him patiently (Acts 26:1–3).

Paul began by pointing out the fact that his Jewish opponents knew he had been a Pharisee who strictly adhered to Judaism. He claimed the opposition was based on his preaching the hope of Israel—the resurrection. He followed these opening remarks with the testimony of how the risen Savior appeared to him on the road to Damascus and commissioned him to proclaim the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles. He changed Paul from a hateful, relentless, zealous persecutor of believers in Jesus to an obedient apostle to the Gentiles (vv. 4–18).

Further, he told Agrippa he was still obedient to the commission he had received, and cited his obedient proclamation of the crucified and risen Savior as the reason the Jews seized him and tried to kill him (vv. 19–23).

Festus accused Paul of being insane, and Agrippa asked whether Paul thought he could persuade him in such a brief time to become a Christian. Paul’s answer was direct. He said he prayed that Agrippa and all who heard his testimony would become like him (converted to Christ) except for his chains. With that, everyone cleared the room, talked among themselves, and admitted Paul was innocent. Agrippa told Festus that Paul could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar (vv. 24–32).

Julius, a centurion, was put in custody of Paul and other prisoners as they sailed to Italy. But the voyage turned extremely rough when a contrary wind arose. Contrary to advice from Paul, the majority decided to keep sailing. Near Crete, the wind reached hurricane force and buffeted the ship to the point of breaking it apart. The sailors tried unsuccessfully to save the ship, but Paul assured everyone that God had promised to spare everyone’s life, although the ship would be destroyed (Acts 27:1–26).

Eventually the ship ran aground, and the soldiers planned to kill the prisoners. However, the centurion would not allow it to happen, because he wanted to spare Paul's life. The ship broke apart, but everyone made it safely to land either by swimming or by floating on planks (vv. 27–44).

The survivors found themselves on the island of Malta, where the islanders built a fire for them. When Paul put wood on the fire, a viper fastened itself on his hand, but he shook it off without suffering any harm. The islanders interpreted this incident as a sign that Paul was a god (Acts 28:1–6).

Later, Paul prayed for the extremely sick father of Publius, the chief official on the island. He placed his hands on the man and healed him. Soon, the rest of the island's sick came to Paul and were healed. Then the islanders supplied everything Paul, the prisoners, soldiers, and crew needed before they sailed away (vv. 7–10).

On his way to Rome, a company of believers met Paul and encouraged him. When he arrived in Rome, he was placed under house arrest (vv. 11–16).

Three days later Paul called the leaders of the Jews together and testified about what had happened to him. At a subsequent meeting, he shared the gospel with them. Some believed his message, but others did not. For two years, Paul welcomed all who came to his rented house, where he faithfully preached about the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 17–31).

## FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that Paul showed excellent people skills when he defended himself before Agrippa?
2. Do you think a Christian should be courteous and respectful of everyone in authority, even if the authority figure is blatantly immoral or antichristian? Why or why not?
3. What did Paul present as the hope of Israel?
4. Why do you agree or disagree that the hope of Israel is still valid?
5. Was Paul right or wrong in appealing to Israel? Defend your answer.
6. What is your impression of Julius, the centurion? Why do you think an unbeliever might be kind to a believer?
7. Do you see any link between the predictions in Mark 16:18 and what happened when a viper attached itself to Paul's hand? Why or why not?
8. Why do you agree or disagree with the statement that “the servant of God is immortal until his or her life's work is done”?
9. How has your testimony persuaded someone to believe in Jesus or to respect Christianity?
10. Why do you agree or disagree that Acts ends on a positive note? How might a homebound believer share the gospel?

## WRAP-UP

Thank the group members for their participation in every session. Close this final session by having the group read or sing, “I'll Tell the World That I'm a Christian.”