

# OUR MISSION

SERMON NOTES

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## ABOUT THESE NOTES

Kenneth Schenck's book, *Our Mission*, draws us back to the dynamic days of the early 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 congregation will discover numerous lessons about personal spiritual growth and church dynamics as you preach on *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.

## RALLY AROUND THE PREACHERS!

Acts 14:1–20

### INTRODUCTION

Being called to preach the gospel is life’s highest calling. It has been said, “If God calls you to be a preacher, don’t stoop to be a king.” However, every faithful preacher of the gospel has difficult days as well as delightful ones. Perhaps not everyone agrees with the message or likes the preaching style. There may be opposition from the Devil’s followers, but a preacher may be shocked when someone thought to be an ally really isn’t. Yet, Jesus did not hide his scars when he commissioned the disciples to preach the gospel to all nations, and he certainly did not call them or us to pursue a path strewn with rose petals. Paul and Barnabas experienced both the mountaintops and valleys associated with proclaiming the gospel.

### SERMON OUTLINE

#### I. Preachers Receive Mixed Responses (Acts 14:1–7)

Missionaries Paul and Barnabas effectively communicated the gospel in Pisidian Antioch and at Iconium, eighty miles southeast of of Pisidan Antioch. At both places, they received a divided response. At Pisidian Antioch, the Gentiles gladly received their message, but the Jews stirred up such opposition against them that they were forced to leave the city (Acts 13:13–52). At Iconium, some sided with the apostles, but others sided with Jews who opposed them. Upon learning of a plot to stone them, the two apostles left and went to Lystra and Derbe (14:1–7).

Occasionally, a church thinks it would be highly successful if the preacher were a famous TV evangelist, but many listeners refuse to believe regardless how famous the preacher is.

## II. Preachers Don't Want to Be Worshiped (Acts 14:8–18)

In Lystra when Paul healed a lame man, a crowd of observers wanted to worship Paul and Barnabas. Even the priest of Zeus idolized Paul and Barnabas. He brought offerings of wreaths and bulls to the two apostles. However, Paul and Barnabas tried to restrain the crowd by explaining that they were just men who had come with God's good news.

Sometimes a church fails to understand that its preacher is as human as the rest of the people in the church. The preacher does not want to be put on a pedestal, but for the people to pray for God's words to be spoken through his vessel, to give glory to God for whatever good they receive from the ministry, and to forgive whatever frailties they find in the preacher.

## III. Preachers May Suffer Abuse (Acts 14:19)

In *Our Mission*, Kenneth Schenck comments, "If we look to the crowds for our self-worth, we are bound to end up on an emotional roller coaster. Sometimes we are popular and can mistake the applause of others for the affirmation that really counts—the praise of God, whose standards are often quite different from those around us" (pp. 17–18).

Some Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium arrived and turned the crowd against Paul. The fickle people of Lystra quickly turned from adoring Paul to attacking him. They pummeled him with stones, dragged him out of the city, and left him there, thinking he was dead.

Probably every faithful preacher has encountered a sudden change of attitude on the part of a few fickle church members. They appreciated the preaching until it made them uncomfortable, and then they stirred up opposition against the preacher. Nevertheless, a preacher must proclaim the truth in love, including correction and rebuke when necessary (2 Tim. 4:2).

## IV. Preachers Receive Loving Support (Acts 14:20)

Putting themselves in harm's way, the disciples gathered around Paul as he laid on the ground. Finally, he got up and went back into the city.

It seems when a preacher is maligned or attacked in some way, believers who love him or her gather around to show love and support. This may take the form of spoken encouragement, a thank-you note, a meal, assurance of prayer, or some other tangible expression of support.

Preachers appreciate whatever loving support they receive, and it helps to strengthen them for the work ahead. Paul and Barnabas did not throw in the towel after they received harsh treatment in Lystra. They departed for Derbe, where they continued to share the good news.

## CONCLUSION

A congregation can encourage their preachers by praying for them daily, refusing to listen to gossip and negative criticism, attending church faithfully, letting them know that their ministry is helpful, giving liberally to the Lord's work, inviting and bringing others to church, and volunteering for ministries in the church.

## RELIGION OR SALVATION?

Acts 17:16–34

### INTRODUCTION

A big difference exists between religion and salvation. Religion imposes ceremonies and obligations on its adherents as the means to obtain forgiveness and admission to heaven. Salvation, by contrast, is God’s free gift to all who believe in Jesus, who paid the full penalty of our sin on the cross and arose from the tomb.

The apostle Paul was fully religious until he received salvation through faith in Jesus. He wrote, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). When he visited the highly philosophical and religious city of Athens, Greece, Paul made a clear distinction between religion and salvation.

### SERMON OUTLINE

#### I. Paul’s Initial Encounter in Athens (Acts 17:16–18)

##### A. He Encountered Idolatry (Acts 17:16–17)

The profusion of idolatry in Athens distressed Paul, so he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and their Gentile proselytes. But he also debated daily in the marketplace, where philosophers gathered to promote their ideas. Obviously, religion flourished in Athens, but it flourished in the context of spiritual darkness.

## B. He Encountered Prominent Philosophies (Acts 17:18)

Epicureans and Stoics argued with Paul. They called him a babbler, someone who picked up ideas from a variety of sources. Their main accusation was that he seemed to be “advocating foreign gods,” but Paul was simply “preaching the good news” (v. 18).

Epicureans believed pleasure and happiness and were life’s highest goals, so they feared death and tried to avoid pain. They doubted the existence of gods, and felt if they did exist, they were not involved in human affairs.

Stoics were fatalistic. They believed some “purpose” was directing all of life in the universe.

## II. Paul’s Encounter with the Areopagus (Acts 17:19–34)

The Epicureans and Stoics took Paul to the Areopagus, where he received an opportunity to explain his views to the city’s council that had oversight of religion and education.

### A. The Substance of Paul’s Address (Acts 17:19–31)

Kenneth Schenck observes in *Our Mission*:

Acts 17:21 says that the Athenians spent most of their time talking about the latest ideas. Here, Luke may have been alluding to the fact that Athens at one time was home to the greatest philosophers of the ancient world. They had put Socrates to death there for his ideas. Plato and Aristotle had runs schools there. However, while we may get the impression that Paul was simply talking to an interested crowd, it is quite possible that the event of Acts 17 was something more like a preliminary hearing to see whether Paul was teaching something illegal. In other words, he was in trouble again. (pp. 40)

Whether or not he was the subject of a hearing, Paul showed no fear, but boldly proclaimed the gospel. Acts 17:22–31 reveals that he referred to the multitude of idols in Athens, including an altar to an unknown God. He identified this unknown God as the creator of heaven and earth and the source and sustainer of life. He explained that the true God wants human beings to seek and find him. Further, he declared that God will ultimately judge all men by the One he raised from the dead.

### B. The Sequel to Paul’s Address (Acts 17:32–34)

In response to Paul’s address, some sneered. The mention of resurrection seemed like nonsense to them. However, others expressed an interest in hearing more from Paul. A few men, including Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, became believers. Damaris, a woman, and a number of other Athenians became believers. We may assume these new believers had previously been religious, but now they possessed salvation.

## CONCLUSION

Idol worship did not end when Paul preached at Athens, but it suffered a sound defeat as a number of Athenians believed on the true God and his Son Jesus. Even today, in many parts of the world religious people bow down to inanimate idols. Of course, the numbers of idol worshipers in North America is small. Or is it? Thousands of men and women worship money, material possessions, fame, stars in the entertainment industry, sports figures, careers, or themselves. Others perceive themselves as religious because they adhere to an established religion. But the Devil doesn't care how religious people are if they fail to receive the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus. Jesus told religious people of his day, "You belong to your father, the devil" (John 8:44).

If you are religious but do not believe in Jesus as your Savior, will you stop trusting in religion and trust in Jesus? When you receive salvation, you will experience forgiveness and assurance of heaven, but religion offers neither of those gifts.

# THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC

## Acts 19:13–20

### INTRODUCTION

Black magic is the use of supernatural magic for evil or selfish purposes. Although it is not commonly practiced in North America, people may be enticed by such things as the horoscope and Ouija board to engage in black magic.

First-century Ephesus harbored many performers of black magic, but when Paul introduced the gospel to Ephesus, the black magic market experienced a crippling blow.

### SERMON OUTLINE

#### I. Counterfeit Exorcists (Acts 19:13–16)

It seems the world has always made room for counterfeiters, whether they counterfeit money, art, antiques, or something else. When God used Paul to free victims from evil spirits in the city of Ephesus, some Jews counterfeited the exorcism.

##### A. Opportunistic (Acts 19:13)

Some Jews seized an opportunity to invoke Jesus' name as a means of driving out demons. Kenneth Schenck comments on this in *Our Mission*: "In Paul's day, there were actually people who tried to use the names of various divinities to influence nature and cast out demons. In this passage, some exorcists tried to use the name of Jesus to cast out demons without actually believing in Jesus. It backfired, to say the least" (p. 53).

### B. Overpowered (Acts 19:14–16)

Schenck’s statement, “It backfired, to say the least,” refers to the event recorded in Acts 19:16–17. When seven sons of Sceva attempted to exorcize an evil spirit, the evil spirit said it knew Jesus and Paul but not them. Suddenly, the demon-possessed man attacked the seven counterfeit exorcists and thoroughly beat them.

Many counterfeit religionists today pretend to follow Jesus, but we need to beware. Instead of accepting them as genuine ministers, we ought to ask them what they believe about the Bible, God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and salvation.

## II. Genuine Confessions (Acts 19:18–20)

### A. Full Repentance (Acts 19:18–19)

When word about what happened to the counterfeit exorcists reached the community, everyone feared, and Jesus’ name “was held in high honor” (v. 17). Many who believed publicly confessed their involvement in black magic. The confession was genuine, and the repentance was thorough, resulting in a public “book” burning. The black magic scrolls that went up in flames were valued at fifty thousand drachmas—equal to about fifty thousand days’ wages! Could there be any doubt this repentance was genuine?

### B. Far-Reaching Results (Acts 19:20)

The dramatic display of God’s power in Ephesus gave dynamic impetus to the missionary effort. “The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power” (v. 20).

Genuine confession and full repentance testify to the reality of God’s work in people’s lives and pave the way for evangelistic outreach.

## CONCLUSION

Someone paraphrased the hymn “Since Jesus Came into My Heart” to say, “Since Jesus came into the town, since Jesus came into the town, many lives have been changed, many homes rearranged, since Jesus came into the town.”

Certainly many lives were changed and many homes were rearranged when Jesus came into Ephesus. Those kinds of changes can take place in our community, too, if we confess our sins, repent, and share the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit.

## BLEST BE THE TIE THAT BINDS

Acts 20:17–38

### INTRODUCTION

The hymn “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” was written by John Fawcett, the pastor of a small country church in 1772. John had just loaded his belongings onto a wagon and was ready to depart for London, where a prestigious church had called him to be its pastor. His parishioners expressed their love for him and told him how deeply they would miss him. John was so touched by the sentiment that he unloaded the wagon and notified the London church that he would not be arriving. Soon after, he penned the words to this classic hymn and stayed at the small country church the rest of his life.

The apostle Paul and the elders of the church at Ephesus experienced a similar heartfelt farewell when Paul was journeying to Jerusalem. It took place at Miletus, a seaport almost forty miles south of Ephesus, where Paul and the elders had agreed to meet.

### SERMON OUTLINE

#### I. Reflections on the Past and the Future (Acts 20:18–27)

##### A. The Past (Acts 20:18–21, 26–27)

Paul had ministered in Ephesus three years. Throughout that time, he had urged both Jews and Gentiles to repent and put their faith in Jesus. His conscience was clear, because he had faithfully proclaimed the whole will of God.

### B. The Future (Acts 20:22–25)

Paul believed the Holy Spirit was compelling him to go to Jerusalem. He didn't know specifically what would happen to him there, but what mattered to him was that he finish the race and complete the work the Lord had assigned. He was also certain the Ephesians elders would never see him again.

Are we faithful to our calling as Paul was to his? Do we live for the Lord's glory? Are we willing to meet any and all trials that lie along the route we are traveling? Is it our top priority to finish the race and fulfill God's will?

## II. Exhortations for the Future (Acts 20:28–35)

### A. Shepherd the Flock (Acts 20:28–31)

Before leaving the elders, Paul charged them with the responsibility to shepherd the flock, the church of God. As faithful shepherds, the elders needed to guard and feed the flock. Paul knew false teachers—savage wolves—would attack the church and emerge from within the church and distort the truth. So the elders needed to be on guard.

### B. Follow My Example (Acts 20:31–35)

Paul had provided a good example of guarding the flock. For three years, he had warned the believers about false teachers and their poisonous doctrines. His reference to his shepherding was his way of saying, "Follow my example!" Paul also worked hard to supply for his needs and for those of his missionary companions. Like the Lord Jesus, Paul found it more blessed to give than to receive.

## III. Expressions of Love (Acts 20:36–38)

### A. Prayer (Acts 20:36)

After addressing the Ephesian elders, Paul knelt with them and prayed. Prayer joins the hearts of Christians in close fellowship with one another and with God.

### B. Embraces and Kisses (Acts 20:37)

The elders demonstrated their love for Paul by embracing and kissing him. Today, members of a church might show they love their preacher by giving a firm handshake or a hug.

### C. A Final Walk (Acts 20:38)

In a show of togetherness, the elders accompanied Paul to the ship that would carry him away. The fact that they would never see him again grieved them greatly.

## CONCLUSION

When a preacher or member of a church moves to a distant community, the church may hold a farewell party. It is hard to say good-bye, but it has been wisely said that Christians never really say good-bye for the last time. In the meantime, while we enjoy the presence of our fellow believers, may we enjoy sweet fellowship and encourage one another to complete the will of God.

## IS JESUS ALIVE?

Acts 25:18–19

### INTRODUCTION

The resurrection of Jesus Christ separates Christianity from all the religions of the world. No religion claims the one it worships arose from the dead, but we Christians claim that Jesus arose from the dead. He is alive, we insist, and we gladly obey him and proclaim him as the only Savior.

The apostle Paul, a former Pharisee, preached with conviction that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and three days later rose from the dead (1 Cor. 15:3–4). This declaration that Jesus was alive attracted the scorn and vehemence of unbelieving Jews, and was one of the charges they brought against Paul before Governor Festus (Acts 25:18–19).

Was Paul right? Are we right? Is Jesus alive? Here are some documented appearances of Jesus in his risen form.

### SERMON OUTLINE

#### I. He Appeared Alive to Peter and the Twelve (1 Cor. 15:5)

##### A. Peter Saw the Risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:5; Luke 24:34; John 21:1–11)

The two disciples on the Emmaus Road declared this fact, and the meeting of Jesus with Peter at the Sea of Galilee confirms it (John 21:1–11).

The resurrection transformed Peter from a cowering denier of Jesus into a courageous declarer of Jesus' resurrection and power to save (Acts 2:29–36). Knowing that Jesus is alive is a strong reason to boldly share the good news.

B. The Twelve Saw the Risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:5; Luke 24:36–49; John 20:19–29)

The disciples did not expect Jesus to rise from the dead. To the contrary, they were hiding behind locked doors because they feared the Jews, and they were full of unbelief. Doubting Thomas believed only after touching Jesus' nail-scarred hands and wounded side. He saw that Jesus was alive in his risen, glorified body.

II. Five Hundred Believers Saw the Risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:6)

A. Simultaneously (1 Cor. 15:6)

Five hundred believers saw the risen Lord at the same time. How can anyone dispute the testimony of so many witnesses to the same event? These five hundred may have received the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20).

B. Most Were Still Living (1 Cor. 15:6)

Most of the five hundred were still alive. They could serve as eyewitnesses that Jesus was alive.

III. James and All the Apostles Saw the Risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:8)

A. James Saw the Risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:8)

The resurrection must have revolutionized James's life. Although he was the Lord's half-brother, he did not previously believe in him. However, after the resurrection, he and the rest of Jesus' half-brothers became believers (John 7:5; Acts 1:14).

B. All the Apostles Saw the Risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:8)

This group was undoubtedly larger than the Twelve. The term *apostles* applied not only to the Twelve, but also to other spiritual leaders who had seen the risen Lord (1 Cor. 9:1; Eph. 4:11).

IV. Paul Saw the Risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:8–9)

A. Paul Was Included (1 Cor. 15:8)

Paul used the designation “abnormally born” (v. 8) to mean that, unlike the Twelve, he had not been alongside Jesus during his earthly ministry. He had not been with the Twelve when the risen Jesus appeared to them. Nevertheless, he met the risen Lord on the road to Damascus.

B. Paul Was Radically Changed (1 Cor. 15:9)

Paul considered himself “the least of the apostles” (v. 9). He knew he did not deserve to be called an apostle, but by grace the risen Lord had transformed him from a vengeful persecutor of the church to a zealous preacher of the gospel.

The same risen Lord can melt the hardest heart and transform even the most horrific sinner into a holy saint.

## CONCLUSION

The Lord commissioned Paul to be his chosen instrument to carry his “name to the Gentiles and their kings” (Acts 9:15). Eventually Paul stood before rulers and faithfully proclaimed the good news about Jesus and his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. The Lord has tasked us too with the responsibility of sharing the good news. We may never receive an opportunity to do share the good news with rulers or other notable people, but the Lord will always put into our paths those who need to hear that Jesus died for their sins and arose from the grave. “He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Heb. 7:25).

## NEVER GIVE UP!

Acts 28:17–31

### INTRODUCTION

Right to the end, the apostle Paul was a relentless champion of the gospel. Although he was hounded by his enemies and beset by hard trials, he kept declaring the good news. He never gave up, and neither should we.

### SERMON OUTLINE

#### I. Paul Never Gave Up Trying to Win the Jews to Jesus (Acts 28:17–28)

##### A. He Emphasized His Adherence to Jewish Customs (Acts 28:17–22)

Three days after arriving in Rome Paul invited leaders of the Jews to meet with him. They accepted the invitation, and when they met with him, they received an explanation of what had brought him to Rome. He said he was bound with a chain because of the hope of Israel.

The hope of Israel was the hope that the Messiah would come and fulfill the Old Testament promises God had made to Israel. The disciples had expressed this hope when the risen Lord met with them before Pentecost (see 1:6).

The leaders insisted they had not received word about Paul, but they had heard that people everywhere were talking about the Christianity, “this sect” (28:22). We may doubt their truthfulness. How could they have heard about Christianity without hearing about its greatest exponent?

### B. He Expounded the Scriptures (Acts 28:23–28)

The Jewish were curious about Paul and his message, so they agreed to meet with him on a given day. When they returned, a large crowd accompanied them, giving Paul the opportunity to expound the Old Testament Scriptures about Jesus the Messiah. His reasoning drew a mixed response. Some agreed with what he said; others disagreed.

The disagreement prompted Paul to quote what the Holy Spirit said through Isaiah about Israel’s calloused heart and unwillingness to hear and see the truth.

Today, too, some who are exposed to the gospel do not accept it. They close their ears and eyes to its life-saving message, and with hard hearts reject it. But God always finds some who give the gospel a favorable hearing. When the Jews rejected the gospel—God’s message of salvation—Paul turned to the Gentiles, who would listen.

We should be encouraged by the fact that the gospel will bear fruit in the hearts and lives of those who gladly receive it. Let’s not be discouraged when some reject the gospel, but let’s keep on sowing the seed and trusting God for a harvest!

## II. He Never Gave Up in Spite of Adverse Circumstances (Acts 28:30–31)

### A. Two Years of Incarceration (Acts 28:30)

Although he was under house arrest and guarded twenty-four hours a day, Paul welcomed all who came to see him. Surely, he shared the gospel with non-Christian visitors and also edified Christian visitors.

In spite of difficult circumstances, we should keep on testifying to the gospel’s power to point sinners to Christ. Also, in spite of difficult circumstances, we should keep on edifying fellow believers. We may depend upon the Holy Spirit to enable us to live above the circumstances.

### B. A Bold Witness (Acts 28:31)

Paul held nothing back when he declared the truth about the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. In doing so, he set a good example for us. We ought to courageously declare all of God’s truth to all people without compromising any of it. The Holy Spirit is alongside to help us share “the word of God [that] is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12).

## CONCLUSION

Acts tells the story of the gospel’s advance from the Jews to the Gentiles and from Jerusalem to Rome, but the mission of the church did not end with Paul’s arrest in Rome. It continues today. It is our mission. How well are we fulfilling it?

In *Our Mission*, Kenneth Schenck challenges us with these words: “In the end, we cannot force someone else to faith. God only expects us to obey and do our best by his power. The ultimate results are not up to us. Because God gives others free will, no amount of witnessing—or even prayer—can ensure someone will come to faith. We can only be faithful” (p. 109).