



BIBLE STUDIES FOR ASHFIELD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

Acts is a little different to most other books in the New Testament. It isn't a letter and it's not a gospel - well, not strictly anyway. But it's a vital book that we would very much be the poorer without.

Acts is the second book that Luke wrote. The first was his gospel, and Acts is the continuation of Luke's record of what took place around him. It's common to think of the gospel of Luke as the book that deals with Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, and Acts as what happened after that. But Luke doesn't think about it in those terms.

In Acts Luke writes about what Jesus **continued** to do and teach, through the Holy Spirit, working in and through the Apostles (and eventually other followers). So Acts links the gospels - which tell of Jesus' life here on earth - and the letters, written by apostles like Paul to encourage the members of the churches we see started in Acts.

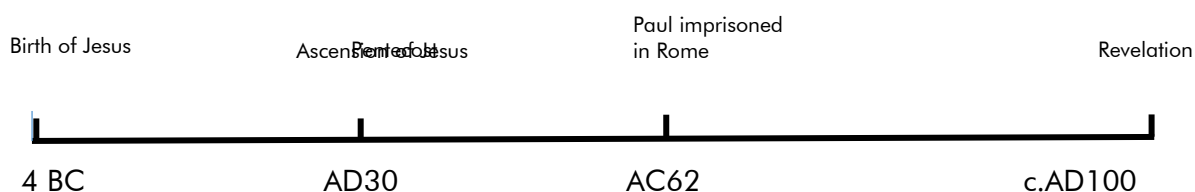
Today, we are facing a crisis in the Christian church. Many observers are shouting out a warning that the so-called 'evangelical' Christian churches around the world are actually in danger of abandoning the gospel that they claim to be so committed to! But this is where Acts can help us. We can learn from the church described in Acts, with a desire to recapture some of their enthusiasm, vision, energy and commitment (although note that the early church was far from perfect itself!).

How did the church get started? What happened immediately after the time of Jesus? How did Christianity move from the small area of Palestine to spread out over the whole world? Those are the questions Acts is going to answer! But wait! There's more!...

There's a bigger issue that's always under the surface in Acts, too - and one that we often take for granted. It's the huge fact that the Kingdom of God breaks out of the boundaries of Judaism, and becomes a kingdom for all the nations. And although Jesus specifically tells his apostles to go to all the nations, they don't seem to want to! There are huge mental barriers to be broken down first - and as we'll see, the Holy Spirit is a very effective "wall-breaker".

So Acts is an exciting story about the power of the gospel - the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus, repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and a Kingdom that will never end. By the power of the Spirit, the gospel is powerfully preached. This is confirmed time and time again, as it storms through the middle-east to the centre of the most powerful empire the world had ever seen... And it's the same gospel at work in the world today!

WHEN THE EVENTS IN ACTS OCCURRED

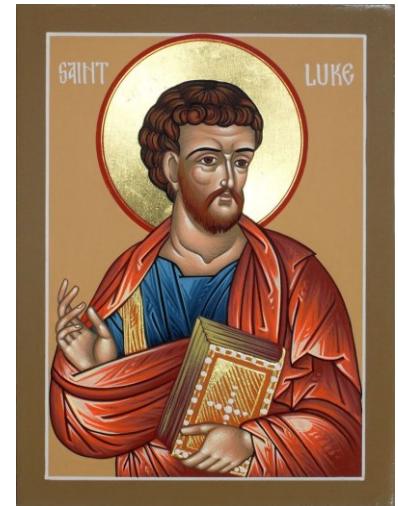


OTHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

AUTHOR:

Luke was a Gentile (non-Jewish) Christian, a travelling companion of Paul, and a medical doctor (Colossians 4:14). He was clearly a close mate of Paul's, and not one of the original twelve disciples. So he wasn't one of the 'inner circle' and he would have had a different perspective on Jesus because he was not a Jew seeing Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. All of this suggests that Luke's record of events had a certain objectivity above that of the other (Jewish) writers.

He was clearly committed to spreading the gospel far and wide to see other Gentiles like himself come under its influence.



DATE:

Luke probably wrote Acts between A.D. 63-65. This is generally taken from the last events recorded in the book (Paul's ministry in Rome). Luke doesn't record what happens to Paul in Rome neither does he mention the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 – something that would have certainly rated a mention if it had happened prior to Luke writing the book.

Why not start reading through the first half of Acts now? You won't be able to put it down!

THE STORY SO FAR

After his resurrection Jesus appeared to the apostles for forty days before he was taken up to heaven. He promised that they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit, and that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8).

On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit came on the group of believers. They declared the wonders of God in foreign languages to hearers who had assembled in Jerusalem from all over the known world (2:1-12). About three thousand believed and were baptised that day (2:41). The group met together every day, and the Lord added to the number daily (2:47).

As the group grew in number and influence, the Sadducees grew jealous (5:17). Peter and John, then later the apostles, were arrested then released.

Another result of growth was that the Greek widows were missing out in the apostles' daily distribution of food. The apostles gave this responsibility to seven (Greek) deacons, including Stephen and Phillip, so the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word (6:1-7). Stephen was arrested for preaching Christ in the Greek synagogue, tried, found guilty and stoned (6:8-7:60). Saul was there giving his approval.

Stephen's stoning was the trigger for a great persecution against the church who all fled throughout Judea and Samaria. Saul began to destroy the church (8:3). Phillip went to Samaria, where many were converted, including an Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40).

ACTS 9:1-31: EYES WIDE SHUT

1. As a child, who or what were you most afraid of?

Read 9:1-31

2. What changes take place in Saul from the beginning of this section to the end? What changes take place in the situation, outlook, and prospects of the church?

3. Damascus was 230 km from Jerusalem. Saul's former teacher was Gamaliel (22:3) who had advised the Sanhedrin to leave the Christians alone (5:34-39). How does Saul respond to this advice? What do these facts tell you about the sort of person Saul is?

4. How are Christians described in this section (9:2, 17, 25, 26, 30, 31)?

5. Describe what happened in v 3-9 from the point of view of Saul's travelling companions.

6. Who was Saul **really** persecuting?

7. How do you think Saul felt when confronted by Jesus? What might he have been thinking about during those three days of blindness?

8. What instructions does Jesus give Ananias? How do you think Ananias felt after his vision of Jesus? What is significant about the way he addresses Saul?

9. What is (are) the purpose(s) of Ananias' visit?

10. What does Saul do next (20 ff)? How do his hearers react? Why?

11. How is he received in Jerusalem by the disciples? Why?

12. How well is the church going at the end of this section (9:31)? Compare this to the other summary statements at 2:47 and 6:7.

To Think About:

13. What types of people do you assume are beyond God's reach? How does this story challenge these assumptions?

14. Who has played the part of an Ananias or a Barnabas in your life? To whom could you play that role?

15. What changes has God made in **your** life?

Prayer Points:

ACTS 9:32-11:18: FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Peter now returns to centre stage for a final appearance. He has been central to the action in Ch 1-8. Then Paul is introduced in Ch 9. Following Ch 12, Peter isn't heard from again (apart from briefly in 15:7-11), and Saul/ Paul dominates the action. Can you think why there might be this overlap of characters in Ch 9-12?

The whole Church throughout Judea [1], Galilee [2] and Samaria [3] now enjoyed a period of peace. Peter travelled from Jerusalem [4] came to God's people living at Lydda [5]. He healed a paralysed man. Then there was a woman in Joppa [6] (who is also healed). Peter traveled to Caesarea [7] to evangelise Cornelius, a (Gentile) centurion, accompanied by some of the brothers from Joppa, arriving at Caesarea on the day after that. He later visits Jerusalem [8] where he explains his reasons for teaching and baptising Gentiles).



Read 9:32-43.

1. What is the purpose of Peter's miracles (9:35, 41-42)?

Read 10:1-23a.

2. Who is controlling the events in this section? How does he do this?

3. What message(s) does God have for Peter? Why three times?

Read 10:23b-48.

4. Imagine the first contact between the two groups- Peter's band of devout Jewish Christians, and Cornelius and his assembled group of eager Gentile friends and relatives. How do you think each group would be feeling?

5. What misunderstandings are there?

6. What is Peter's attitude to the meeting (27-29)? Why?

7. What are the key points of Peter's message (34-43)? What happens (44-48)?

Read 11:1-18

8. What news do the apostles and brothers receive? Which part of the message do they choose to focus on (11:1-3)?

9. How does Peter's answer emphasise that God was behind the events at Caesarea (11:4-17)?

10. How do the brothers respond (11:18)?

11. Why might Luke have gone to the trouble of retelling the story in such detail?

To Think About:

12. What religious traditions need to be broken to make sure God's offer (10:34-35; 11:18) goes to EVERYONE?

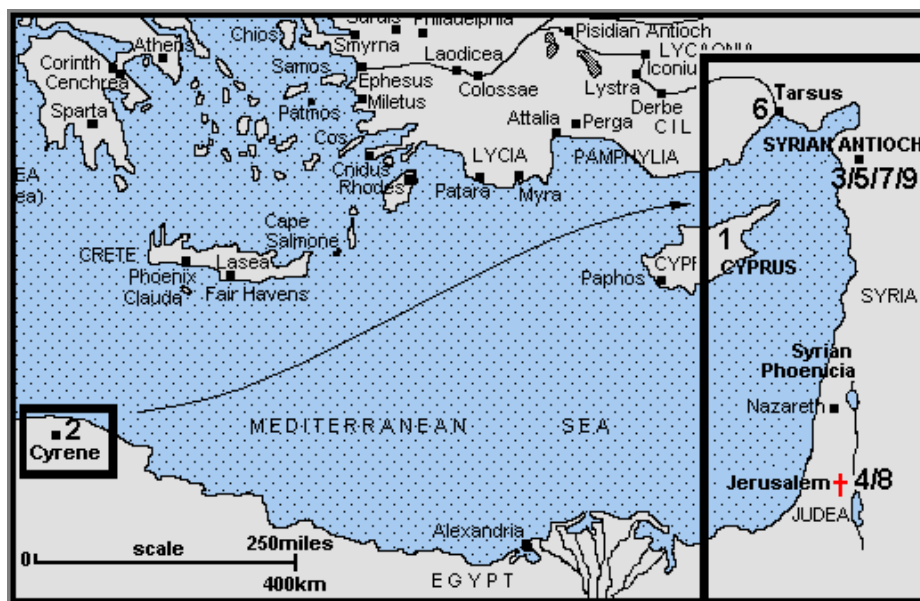
13. Towards what type of people do you feel prejudiced? How has that developed? What does this passage have to say to you?

Prayer Points:

ACTS 11:19-12:24: ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Read 11:19-30.

Taken from Acts 11:19-30 - Those who had been dispersed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and (Syrian) Antioch, giving the message as they went to Jews only. However, among their number were natives of Cyprus [1] and Cyrene [2], and these men, on their arrival at (Syrian) Antioch [3], proclaimed their message to the (Gentile) Greeks as well, telling them the good news of the Lord Jesus. A great number believed and turned to the Lord. News of these things came to the ears of the Church in Jerusalem [4] and they sent Barnabas to (Syrian) Antioch [5].



Syrian Antioch - present day Antakya in southern Turkey. This Antioch was known as "Queen of the East", capital of the province of Syria, and the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. With a population of over half a million people, it was located on the River Orontes, and a junction of trade routes between East and West. It should not be confused with Pisidian Antioch, a Phrygian town in the Roman province of Galatia –

.... Then Barnabas went to Tarsus [6] to find Saul (Paul). When he found him he brought him up to Antioch [7]. Then for a whole year they met together with the Church and taught a large crowd. It was in Antioch that the disciples were first given the name of "Christians".

During this period some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them by the name of Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there was to be a great famine throughout the world. (This actually happened in the days of Claudius). The disciples determined to send relief to the brothers in Judea, each contributing as he was able. This they did, sending their contribution to the elders there (in Jerusalem [8]) personally through Barnabas and Saul (who later return to Syrian Antioch [9]).

This section picks up the story from 8:1, showing the big picture of how believers spread out from Jerusalem. The chapters in-between have focussed on individuals.

1. What are the two steps involved in the message going out in 11:19-21?

Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman empire (after Rome and Alexandria). It becomes a strategic centre for the spread of the gospel, becoming the home-base for Paul's missionary journeys (13:1-4; 15:40; 18:23)

2. Why was Barnabas a good choice to send to Antioch (see 4:36; 9:27)? What does he do when he arrives?

3. How are the Gentile believers able to help their Jewish Christian brothers (11:27-30)? The baby church has grown up enough to be able to support the mother church!

Extra Work!: See other references to this collection among the Gentile Christians in Rom 15:25-27; 2 Cor 8:1-4; 9:1-5.

Read 12:1-24.

As the Gentile church goes from strength to strength, the Jewish church seems to be struggling. The story returns again to Peter.

4. How does this story emphasise that it was God who was delivering Peter, not the abilities of Peter or the church?

5. Do you see any elements of humour or irony in this account?

6. Considering that James had been executed, and that Peter was in prison, what do you think the Jews might have been anticipating (12:11)?

7. Who is the James of v17 (see Gal 1:18-19)? Why do you think he is mentioned specifically? What does this tell you about his importance in the Jerusalem church? See also 15:13-21.

8. Rather than Peter dying, who dies instead (12:19; 11:20-23)?

9. What contrasts do you see in this section between Herod's power and God's power? What is the fate of the gospel, compared with the fate of Herod?

To think about:

10. What worldly forces seem all-powerful to you? How does this chapter put them in perspective?

11. How are you like the people at the prayer meeting? What prayers would you be surprised if God answered affirmatively?

Prayer Points:

ACTS 12:25-13:52: RECOGNISING ROYALTY

12:25 resumes the story of Saul and Barnabas from the end of Ch 11.

Read 12:25-13:52.

1. What part did the church play in sending Saul and Barnabas out? What part did the Holy Spirit play?
2. Should we expect the Holy Spirit to speak to us today? How?
3. To what work (13:2) had Saul been called (see 9:15; 22:21)?
4. Their first stop was Cyprus – Barnabas' home (4:36). How might Barnabas have felt as he returned there on a mission?
5. At each place, where do they begin witnessing (13:5; 14)? Why? See 13:46-48; 14:1, and Rom 1:16.
6. What opposition do they meet (13:6-8)? What does Saul do (13:9-12)? How does this echo Saul's own earlier blindness?
7. 13:9 lists Saul's two names. Saul is his Jewish, given name. Paul was his later, Greek name. After this point, he is referred to as Paul. Why might Luke have done this?
8. When have people opposed what you believe? When is it right to strongly confront people who oppose the faith?
9. What are the main points of Paul's speech in Pisidian Antioch (13:16-41)?
10. What does Paul emphasise about Jesus' resurrection?

Paul's First Missionary Journey: Taken from Acts 13:4-14:28 - Barnabas and Paul went down (from Syrian Antioch [1]) to Seleucia [2] and from there sailed off to Cyprus. On their arrival at Salamis [3] they began to proclaim God's message in the Jewish synagogues. They made their way through the island as far as Paphos [4] then continue on to Galatia

Galatia - A large Roman province in Asia Minor, extending almost from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean through the mountains and plains of modern central Turkey. Settled by Gauls from central Asia in the 3rd century BC, Galatia included the Phrygian town of Pisidian Antioch; not to be confused with Syrian Antioch

They arrive at Perga [5] in Pamphylia, then to the Antioch in Pisidia [6]. A week later Paul and Barnabas are expelled from the district and went on to Iconium [7]. When a hostile movement arose to stone them, they fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra [8] and Derbe [9], and the surrounding countryside - and from there they continued to proclaim the Gospel. (In Lystra, they heal a crippled man and are nearly worshipped as gods)

Then some Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and stoned Paul. The very next day he went out with Barnabas to Derbe, and when they had preached the Gospel to that city and made many disciples, they turned back to Lystra [10], Iconium [11] and Antioch [12]. They then crossed Pisidia and arrived in Pamphylia. They proclaimed their message in Perga [13] and then went down to Attalia [14]. From there they sailed back to Antioch (in Syria) [15] When they arrived there they called the Church together and reported to them how greatly God had worked with them and how he had opened the door of faith for the Gentiles. And here at Antioch they spent a considerable time with the disciples.



11. If you had to emphasise one central truth about the gospel, what would it be? Why?

12. What response does Paul call for? How do the people respond?

13. How do the Jews respond? What is Paul's answer to them (13:46-48)?

14. What is the result of their preaching in Pisidian Antioch (13:48-52)?

To Think About:

15. How do you think Paul would respond to a modern-day sceptic who felt Jesus was a noble, but misguided, martyr?

16. How does your life show that you recognise Jesus as God's chosen king?

Prayer Points:

ACTS 14: POLITICALLY INCORRECT

This chapter tells the story of the final part of Paul's first missionary journey. At the end of the chapter they return to Syrian Antioch, from where they began in 13:1.

Read Ch 14.

1. What is the connection between preaching and miracles (3)?
2. What is the connection between faith and healing (9)?
3. Compare v8-13 with 3:1-11. How are the two stories alike and different? What results from each healing?
4. What misunderstanding does the healing produce?
5. What is the response of Paul and Barnabas? How do they describe God (15-17)? Why?
6. How is their speech here different from Paul's sermon in the synagogue in 13:17-41? Why?
7. Jews came from Antioch and Iconium to Lystra chasing Paul and Barnabas (19). What might have provoked them to stone Paul (19)?
8. From Lystra they travel to Derbe (20), winning more converts (21). After this they return to Syrian Antioch (home base) the long way around, via Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian Antioch and Perga (see the map on the next page). Why (22-23)?
9. After the treatment Paul and Barnabas received, how would you have felt if you were one of the new believers at Lystra? What about when you heard they'd returned (21)?
10. What happened on their return to Syrian Antioch (26-28)? How would you have felt about returning if you were Paul and Barnabas? How would have felt about their news if you were the Antioch church?

How can we do similar things with missionaries and workers we support?

To Think About:

11. Seeing Paul and Barnabas' courage, faith and endurance, how are you challenged to serve the Lord more completely?

Prayer Points:



ACTS 15:1-35: AMAZING GRACE

During the long time that Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch (14:28), trouble is brewing. It comes from inside the church rather than external persecution. Jewish Christians from Jerusalem arrive and begin teaching that unless the Gentiles are circumcised they cannot be saved (1).

This is the culmination of the debate that has been occurring since 8:14, when the Jerusalem Christians sent Peter and John to confirm that Samaritans had become Christians. Peter's vision of unclean food convinced him that God's plan of salvation included Gentiles (10:27-28, 34-35). When the Roman centurion Cornelius, together with his friends and family, became Christians and were baptised, the issue is decided – "God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (10:45-48; 11:18).

But the question remained, how much of the Jewish law were the Gentiles required to keep, and did their salvation depend on it. It is this question which is now addressed.

Read 15:1-35.

1. Circumcision seemed to the test for these people of whether someone was keeping the law of Moses (15:1; 5). What other things might they be saying was necessary for the Gentiles to do (see Mk 2:16, 18, 24; 7:1-5)
2. What is the main issue as Paul sees it? (v2; see Gal 2:21; 3:5, 10-14)
3. How do Paul's missionary experiences support his position (15:3, 12)?
4. How would you describe Peter's struggle with this issue (15:7-11; 10:28, 34-35)? What is his conclusion?
5. After much discussion, James closes the debate. What does he add to the argument?
6. What roles do you see played by experience, theology and practical considerations in the decision-making process of the council?

7. What add-ons to the gospel might a new believer experience in our church? What should we do about that?

8. What conclusion does James come to (19-21)?

Although the Gentile Christians are not required to be circumcised to be saved, they are encouraged to live out their new faith in distinctive ways.

It is likely that the first command is a heading for the rest:

The pollutions of idols

- Sexual immorality
- Meat of strangled animals
- Blood

Each of the requirements are to probably to do with Gentile idol worship in the pagan temples: sacrifices and temple prostitution, rather than some cut-down version of Mosaic law. They are more to do with how the Gentile Christians in Antioch relate to other Gentiles than how they relate to Jewish Christians.

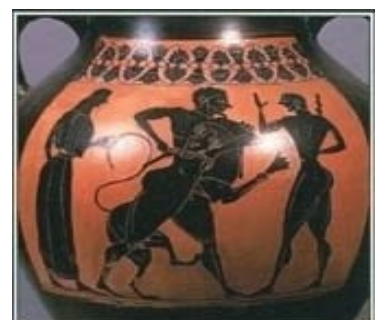


Greek Apulian Red Figure Krater. 4th century BC. Philadelphia Museum of Art



Sacrifice of a young boar in ancient Greece (tondo from an Attic red-figure cup, 510-500 BC, by the Epidromos Painter, collections of the Louvre)

V21 is the justification for the commands of v20. Since Jews have received instruction on how to live distinctively in the cities where they live, Gentiles also require similar instruction.



9. The apostles and elders reach a decision. Now the decision must be communicated to the Gentile churches. They choose two of their number, as well as Paul and Barnabas, to carry the letter and communicate their message. What is the tone of the letter? What are its main points?

10. How do Judas and Silas personally add to the letter?

11. How was the letter received in Antioch (30-35)?

12. How would the church today be different if those of 15:5 had won?

To Think About:

13. How do you view other Christians whose worship and lifestyle is historically different from yours (Catholic-Protestant, Pentecostal-traditional, other nationalities)?

14. How might v 30-33 be a model for unity within diversity among these churches? What might this look like in practical terms?

15. In the light of 1:8, how important is it to work at this type of relationship?

Prayer Points:

ACTS 15:36-16:40: WHAT MATTERS MOST



Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 15:40-18:23)

Read Acts 15:36-41.

1. In what ways do you see (or can you assume) unity between Paul and Barnabas (vv. 36-41)? In what area did they disagree?

2. What arguments might Paul have used for his point of view? Barnabas? Who do you think was right?

3. What is the place of forgiveness and restoration in the church? Always? Sometimes? Never? Case-by-case?

4. **Read 2 Tim 4:11.** How does the relationship between Paul and Mark turn out?

Read Acts 16:1-5.

5. In Lystra Paul recruits Timothy and has him circumcised “because of the Jews living in the area”. As they travel, they deliver the decisions reached in Ch 15 that Gentiles don’t need to be circumcised in order to be saved – a decision Paul passionately agrees with (15:2). How do these two actions fit together? Is Paul being inconsistent? (See also 1 Cor 9:19-23)

Read Acts 16:6-40.

6. In verses 6-10 how is Paul directed concerning where he should go? What principles of guidance do you see in verses 6-10?

Notice the “we” in v10. It is likely that the author, Luke, joined Paul at this part of the journey in Troas.

7. Paul responded immediately to God's message. How was his obedience confirmed on arriving in Macedonia (vv. 11-15)?
8. How did the Lord open YOUR heart? Are you aware of any of the ways he worked behind the scenes to bring you to him?
9. Some time later, a girl with an evil spirit makes an announcement concerning the missionaries. What does she say (17)? What influence might this true statement actually be having on the missionaries effectiveness?
10. Paul cast the evil spirit out of a slave girl. The slaveowners had Paul and Silas jailed. How do Paul and Silas respond?
11. If you were the jailer, what would your response be? How DOES the jailer respond? How does he express his new faith in Jesus?
12. How does your response to opposition to and suffering for the gospel compare and contrast to that of Paul and Silas (v. 25)?
13. Is there a person or task to which God is calling you? What steps do you need to take for immediate and unreserved obedience?

Prayer Points:

Ask God to give you courage as you step in faith to obey him, to tell those around you about the good news that has transformed your life.

ACTS 17:1-15: REASON TO BELIEVE

Read 17:1-15.

1. In this section Paul interacts with two cities and two different cultures. Compare and contrast Paul's ministry in Thessalonica and Berea. What approach did he take? How was his message received by the people? What kind of results did he have?
2. What types of accusations has Paul faced so far (5-7, also 16:20-21)? What lies behind these accusations?
3. Despite the fierceness of the opposition in Thessalonica, how well does the little group of believers survive (see 1 Thess 1:4-10)?
4. The Jews accuse Paul of proclaiming "another king" (7). How should Christians balance serving King Jesus as well as serving human authority?
5. Jason was probably Paul's Christian host in Thessalonica. How would you have felt if you were Jason? How do you think Paul might have felt about the trouble he'd caused Jason? Read 1 Thess 3:1-10. What do we learn about the result of Paul's ministry from these verses?
6. How did the Jews at Berea display a "more noble character" than those at Thessalonica (11)? What was the result?
7. The Thessalonian Jews follow Paul to Berea (about 80 km) and continue to make trouble. What do the brothers decide to do? Why?
8. Who stays behind? Why?
9. Since his conversion Paul has been forced by persecution to leave an area at least half a dozen times. How would you view your mission if that happened to you? How does your view compare with Paul's (see 1 Thess 2:1-6)?

Prayer Points:

ACTS 17:16-34: MEET THE UNKNOWN GOD

Only a few short decades ago, Christians in the West could assume that most people they met belonged to a church or at least based their lives on Judeo-Christian values. Today, Christians in the West face what Christians in the East have had to cope with for centuries—a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices that often have little in common with Christianity. The world's major religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, are making inroads as are a variety of cults, New Age philosophies, occultic activities and even traditional paganism. How do we cope with a world that knows or cares so little about the truth of Jesus Christ? Paul left us a helpful model when he visited the world center of pagan philosophy and religion—Athens.

Read 17:16-34.

1. What do we learn about the city of Athens from these verses?
2. In Athens, where does Paul preach about Jesus?
3. The Stoics believed that god was in everything, and everything was god (pantheism). Epicureans had little or no belief in god at all. What 5 truths does Paul emphasise about God (23-30)? What 3 facts about God's judgment does he refer to?
4. By speaking as he does in 23 is Paul acknowledging the authenticity of their worship?
5. Though Paul approaches people differently, some points in the content of his message are very consistent. Identify these (vv. 3, 18, 24-28, 30-31).
6. How does Paul use their own culture to help them see the weaknesses in the way they relate to "god"?
7. How is this sermon different to 13:16-41? Why?

8. Is the lack of quoting Scripture a strength or weakness? Why?

9. John Stott says "Many people today are rejecting our gospel today not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be trivial" How does Paul's presentation emphasise the importance of his message?

10. How is this sermon like the one in 13:16-41 in what they teach about Jesus? In what they call people to do?

11. How does the response in Athens (32-34) compare with Berea (17:12) and Thessalonica (17:4)?

12. What distresses you spiritually about the area we live in?

13. How can we be adapting our message to fit in with where the people around us are at?

Prayer Points:

Ask God to show you what you have in common with the non-Christians in your life.