

BIBLE STUDIES FOR ASHFIELD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

INTRODUCTION: GETTING UP TO SPEED

This is our third set of studies on the book of Acts.

Before ascending into heaven Jesus told His disciples: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." (Luke 24:46-47 NIV)

The book of Acts picks-up where Luke's Gospel finishes. The Gospel records events surrounding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus - persuading us that Jesus is the Christ of the Old Testament. Then Acts continues the account of fulfilment with the proclamation of the resurrected Lord Jesus: "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8 NIV)

Acts 1-7 describes the gospel spreading through **Jerusalem and Judea**.

Acts 8 describes the gospel spreading to **Samaria**

Acts 9-28 describes the gospel spreading to **the Gentiles**, and focusses on the Apostle Paul.

Paul goes on three missionary journeys, beginning each time from his home base of Syrian Antioch.

- Acts 13:4-14:28 describes his first journey through Asia Minor
- Acts 15:39-18:22 describes his second journey extending into Europe (Macedonia and Achaia), returning to Antioch via Jerusalem
- Acts 18:23-21:17 describes his third journey, re-visiting the cities he had already planted churches in. It finishes in Jerusalem, where he is arrested.

The rest of the book describes his trials and travels to Rome (sometimes called his fourth journey).

The book finishes with him in Rome, awaiting his trial before Caesar.



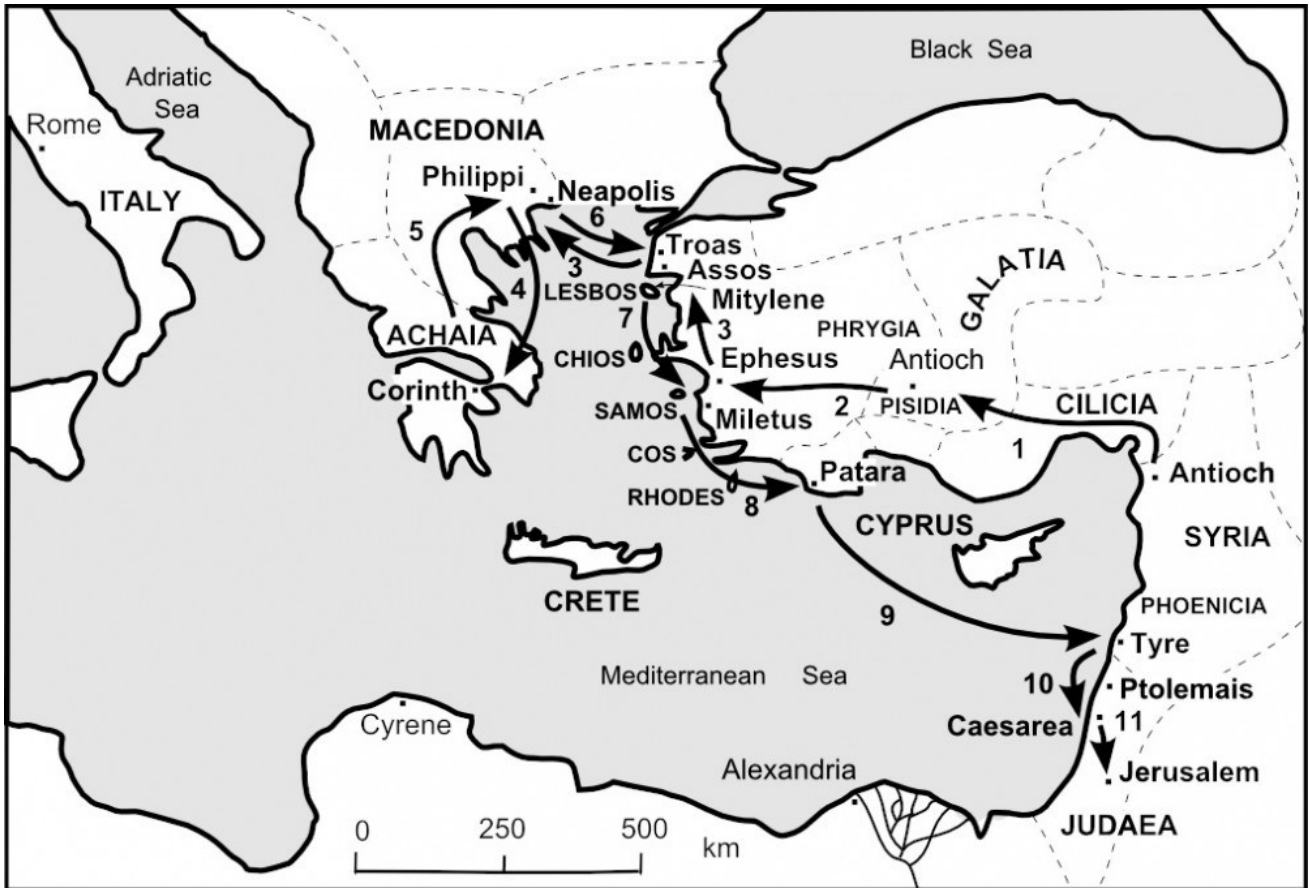
ACTS 18 CRISIS IN CORINTH

1. **Read Acts 18:1-17.** List the people in Paul's life that you see in this passage.
2. Describe Paul's daily routine from vv1-4. How does the arrival of Silas and Timothy change that (5)?
3. Which nation is Paul's priority (5-6)? At what point does he shift his attention to the Gentiles (7)?
4. How would the Lord's message (9-11) to Paul have encouraged him?
5. How did Timothy's arrival encourage Paul (see Phil 2:20-22)?
6. How do you think your gifts and encouragement can support missionaries today?
7. What is the attitude of the Roman authorities to Paul's message (12-17)?

Read 18:18-28. After building on his work in Corinth for a year and a half, he takes Aquila and Priscilla to Ephesus and leaves them there while he continues to Caesarea and eventually makes it back to Antioch (22) where he'd begun his second missionary journey (15:35-36).

18:23 describes the first part of Paul's third missionary journey (continued at 19:1). Refer to the map on the next page.

8. Describe Apollos (vv. 24-26).
9. How was Apollos' ministry affected by his relationship with Aquila and Priscilla (vv. 27-28)?
10. When has someone encouraged you with good news of God's work elsewhere, entered into your ministry, shared themselves or their home with you, or supported you financially or in other ways? Is there anyone you can have a similar influence on?



Prayer Points

Who are your companions in ministry? Thank God for their presence in your life as good gifts from him.

Who among your friends needs to hear about Jesus? Write them down, and pray for them – that God would give you courage and opportunities to talk about Jesus with them. Pray that God would open their hearts.

ACTS 19: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Read Acts 19:1-22.

1. Where do you see God's power revealed?
2. From 18:19-21, why might Paul have headed straight for Ephesus on his next trip?
3. In 19:1-7 Paul encounters some disciples. Who probably instructed them (18:24-25)? Do you think they were Christians? Why/ why not? (See 2:38 and Eph 1:13 and 1 Jn 4:13).
4. Throughout this entire passage it is evident that Paul has a strategy for communicating the gospel. Specifically, what strategy does Paul have for his ministry in Ephesus (19:8-10)? How is it similar to his strategy in Corinth (18:5-7)?
5. What seems to be the signal throughout Acts for Paul to stop teaching in the synagogues? Why do you think this is so? What do these "stop and go" signals teach you about ministry in general?
6. Compare 8-10 and 13-15. How do these two different groups of Jews view Jesus differently?
7. From the reaction of the crowd in 17-19 how would you describe the general response to Jesus prior to v 13-16? Why would these events change the people's ideas so much?
8. How do people today try to use Jesus for their own purposes? What is the difference between that and real faith?
9. What did you have to change in your lifestyle when you first began to follow Jesus? Are there still things now you are reluctant to burn for God? What would it cost you to burn them?
10. What is the cause of the riot in Ephesus (19:23-41)? How was it settled?

Prayer Points

Thank God for the amazing fact that he uses us, sinful humanity, to spread the gospel and advance his kingdom. Thank him for using you.

Write down the names of your two friends who need to hear about Jesus. Pray for them.

ACTS 20-21:16: GUIDANCE AND THE VOICE OF GOD

Moving on ... to Jerusalem

After spending three years in Ephesus (20:31) Paul is on the move again. He is determined to revisit the churches in Macedonia before returning to Jerusalem and finally making it to Rome (19:21, c.f. 1:8b).

Things were not so simple!

Read Acts 20:1-16

1. Have a go at tracing the places mentioned on your map on page 4, and at the same time make a list of who Paul's travelling companions are. It's quite a group.
2. Eutychus is famous for all the wrong reasons! But what does this incident show about how Paul encouraged Christians?

Paul knows he will not make another trip to Ephesus, instead he arranges to meet the elders from the church in Ephesus, in Miletus.

Read Acts 20:17-21

3. How does Paul describe his ministry in Ephesus?
4. What does Paul reveal of his purpose and methods?

It's worth recalling what Jesus said to Ananias when Paul had been struck blind on the road to Damascus: "But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." (Acts 9:15-16 NIV) Paul is in no doubt that he will suffer - yet he presses on.

Read Acts 20:22-38

5. Why does Paul keep on going despite the certainty of hardships?
6. What threat is Paul concerned about for the future of this church?

Considering this church's history is this the threat you'd expect?

7. What defence does Paul provide against this threat?
8. What does his farewell tell us about Paul's ministry?

That day in Miletus must have been difficult for Paul and the elders from Ephesus, and no doubt for everyone in Paul's travelling party. They had many shared memories and much to thank God for but at the same time they all had things to be concerned about in the days to come.

Read Acts 21:1-16

9. Trace Paul's journey on your map.
10. Run your eyes back over the passage and note the ways Paul is warned and discouraged against going to Jerusalem.
11. Paul should have no doubt about the result of his visit to Jerusalem. Why do you think he continued despite these warning?

What about us? For most of us, receiving a direct word of prophecy saying "If you go there you'll be hurt" would be more than enough to turn us around! But to take that approach may well mean NOT doing God's will! Christians often look for a "feeling of peace" as a way of knowing which path to take in a difficult decision - but Paul certainly has no "feeling of peace". (Look back at 20:22!)

What conclusion do Paul's friends come to in 21:14?

12. How does Paul's passion for Jesus and for other believers challenge you?
13. Write out Paul's words in 21:13:

Can you say the same?

Another Journey to Jerusalem

As Luke (the writer of Acts) is recording these things, there's no doubt he's thinking back to his earlier book - Luke's Gospel - where he told the story of someone else who set out for Jerusalem, refusing to turn back, although He knew exactly what lay ahead. Turn back to Luke 9, and read verse 21 to 26.

14. In what ways is Paul putting the words of Jesus into practice?
15. In what ways can you use these words of Jesus in guiding your own decision making?

Prayer Points

Write down the names of your two friends who need to hear about Jesus. Share any opportunities you've had to speak to them. Pray for them.

ACTS 21:17-22:30: WRONG!

Paul has been warned by God's Spirit that disaster is waiting for him at the hands of the Jews in Jerusalem - but he heads there anyway. As we saw last week, for Paul, there's something far more important than his personal safety and convenience.

Review

According to the prophecy of Agabus in 21:11, what will happen to Paul in Jerusalem?

Read Acts 21:15-40, keep Agabus' words in mind as you read.

1. How was Paul received by
 - a) the brothers in Jerusalem?
 - b) James and the elders in Jerusalem?
2. What does Paul particularly TELL James and the elders?
3. What BAD NEWS is there from James?

Are the rumours that James reports TRUE?

What important difference should we notice between the GENTILES Paul is speaking about, and the JEWS WHO LIVE AMONG THE GENTILES? What do you think Paul would say to each of these groups about THE LAW OF MOSES?

What advice does James give to Paul? What is his motive?

What does Paul do?

Read Acts 21:27-40.

4. What accusation is made against Paul?

Is it true?
5. In what ways do the events of verses 30 to 36 remind you of what happened to JESUS when he came to Jerusalem? (Look at Luke 19:45-47 for an example.)

Read Acts 22:1-21.

Paul's speech to the Jews in chapter 22, and fill in the following blanks as you go...

- a) Paul speaks to them in _____ - their own local dialect.
- b) Paul says, "I am a _____, born in Tarsus, brought up in _____"
- c) I was educated under _____ (the most honoured Rabbi in the city)

- d) I was thoroughly trained in _____ and was _____ .
- e) I _____ followers of the way (Christians), arresting or killing them.
- f) The _____ and the _____ can confirm this!
- g) As I came towards Damascus, I was struck down by a light and heard the voice of _____
- h) I was taken to a man called Ananias, who was _____ and highly respected by _____.
- i) Ananias said, "The _____ has chosen you to know His will. You will be a witness to _____ of what you have seen and heard."
- j) When I came back to Jerusalem, the Lord told me to leave quickly, because _____.
- k) I said, "Lord they'll listen to me because _____"
- l) The Lord said, "Go - I will send you to _____."
6. Oooops! Paul just said that G-word again! How do the Jews respond when they hear that God wants to include NON JEWS in his family?

Read Acts 22:23-30.

Paul's Roman citizenship saves his skin again - but only long enough to get him in front of the Sanhedrin, the same Jewish council that had condemned Jesus. But more of that next time...

WHAT ABOUT US?

When we read about the attitude of the Jews, who so much wanted to keep God's favour to themselves, it's easy to be critical. But are there ways that we do exactly the same thing? Think about these...

- i) Are you RACIST? That's what the Jews were. They thought they were better than everyone else, and so DESERVED to be the people of God. Do you have attitudes that need reforming in this area?
- ii) Are you SELECTIVE about the sort of people you think are eligible to be Christians, or part of our church? How welcoming are YOU to people who are different?
- iii) Are you SELFISH about sharing the gospel? YOU KNOW the way to be right with God... are you keen for other people to hear about it, or do you want to keep it to yourself?

Prayer Points

Write down the names of your two friends who need to hear about Jesus. Is there a church event you could invite them to? Pray for them.

ACTS 23-24: TAKING UP YOUR CROSS

Paul's visit to Jerusalem has gone exactly the way the Holy Spirit warned him it would, with false accusations, beatings, abuse and arrest. Now he's about to appear before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council - and that's just the start.

Read Acts 23:1-11.

1. How would you describe the attitude of Ananias the High Priest?

Is it likely that Paul will get a fair hearing?

2. What strategy does Paul use as he speaks to the Sanhedrin?
3. What is the result?

Paul is taken back into protective custody by the Roman commander. That night, he is visited and encouraged by the Lord Jesus himself - and given instructions for the next stage of his mission. Read verse 11 carefully - it's a summary of everything that is going to happen in the final four chapters of Acts.

- * What has Paul been doing so far?
- * Where has he done it?
- * What must Paul keep doing?
- * Where must he do it now?
- * What manner or attitude must Paul have?

From Paul's point of view, his visit to Jerusalem held no surprises. Just as he expected, he was beaten, imprisoned and abused. But Jesus says he's done a great job... and there's more of the same to come.

No wonder Paul needs to be reminded to "have courage" - it's not easy work! But how will he get from Jerusalem to Rome, when he's in protective custody, surrounded by Jews who are howling for his blood? God has it all under control!

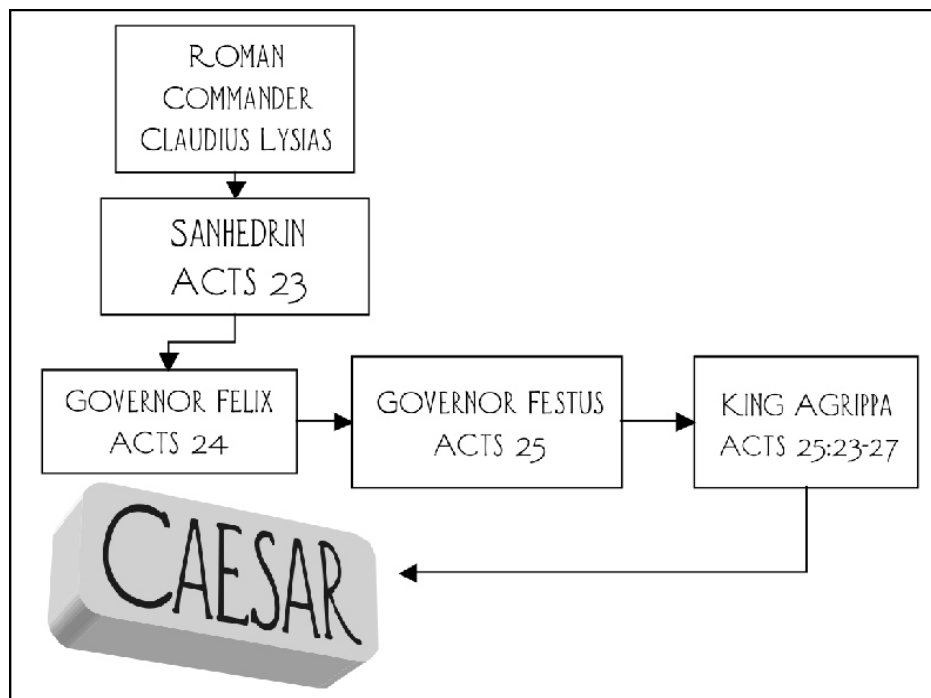
Read Acts 23:12-35.

4. Who are the "good guys" and who are the "bad guys" in this section? Why is this ironic?
5. How does the Jewish assassination plot achieve stage 1 in Paul's new mission?
6. Look back at the words of Jesus in Mark 13:9-11. Why should these words be reassuring to Paul?

According to Jesus in Mark 13:9, what will the goal be when his followers stand before Governors and Kings?

A Trail of Trials (Acts 24-26)

Paul is about to face a long string of trials, which are set out in the diagram below. After the Roman Commander has Paul grilled by the Jewish Sanhedrin in Acts 23, he sends him on to the court of Governor Felix in the city of Caesarea.



7. What are the charges laid against Paul in 24:5? Are they fair?
8. What reasons does Paul give for claiming that “the Way” (Christianity) is not out of step with what the Jews believe?
9. In Paul's private meeting with Felix and his wife (24:24-26), what does he talk about, what does it include, and what is the result?

THINK IT OVER

Often we let opposition STOP US talking about Jesus. Perhaps we should look at opposition as opportunity! What prevents us from doing this?

Thinking back over the things you've seen in this study, what re-assurance is there that even in the middle of opposition and trouble, God's plans are being worked out. How does this help you face hard times in your own life?

Romans 8:28 is a famous verse that makes the same point. Are there times when you've wondered whether this is really true? Are there times when, looking back, you can see it has been?

Prayer Points

Write down the names of your two friends who need to hear about Jesus. Share any opportunities you've had to speak to them. Pray for them.

ACTS 25-26: WHEN BEING SINCERE ISN'T ENOUGH

Paul remains in prison for two years, and Felix is replaced by Porcius Festus. Amazingly, the first business put before Festus on his trip to Jerusalem is... Paul. The chief priests won't let the matter rest. In fact, they want Paul transferred to Jerusalem so they can ambush him and kill him.

Read Acts 25:1-22

1. From 25:7-8, what sort of false allegations were being made against Paul?
2. Think back to the mission Jesus gave Paul. Caesar was the ruler of the whole empire, and he was based in Rome. Why does Paul make the appeal in verse 10-11?

What is the result?

What opportunity will this give to Paul?

Paul has already appeared before two Roman Governors, Felix and Festus. Now he has appealed his case directly to Rome, where he will have the opportunity to speak before Caesar himself. The trouble is, Festus can't decide what to write on the charge-sheet he'll send to Caesar. When King Agrippa drops by for a cuppa, Festus asks for his advice. So Paul appears before King Agrippa, his wife Bernice, and the high ranking officials of the city. According to Paul, everything that happened is because he had a huge change of heart!

Read Acts 25:23-26:32

In Acts 26, Paul makes his defense. After the usual polite beginning, Paul speaks about his early days as a faithful Jew.

3. From v1-11, list the things he once did to oppose "the name of Jesus of Nazareth."
4. Paul seems to be claiming that he has both **changed** and yet **not changed**. How can this be?
5. Read carefully the words Jesus spoke to Paul on the road in 26:14-18. Jesus is appointing Paul as a servant and a witness. According to the "mission statement" Jesus gives to Paul in 26:17-18, what situation are the Gentiles in before they hear the gospel?

* Their eyes are _____

* They are in _____

* They are under the power of _____

* They need to receive _____

6. Do you think the same descriptions apply to people today? Why, or why not? If it does apply, then who to?
7. How does a person move "from the power of Satan to God", and receive forgiveness of their sins?
8. According to the message Paul goes on to preach to both Jews and the Gentiles, what is involved in the process of "being sanctified by faith in Jesus."?
9. Why have the Jews opposed Paul? (v21)

Look back to the meeting Paul had with Felix and his wife in 24:25. How is their response similar?

Are you ever tempted to reject the gospel (or put it on hold) because it challenges you to repent and change? (Maybe you can give some examples of times like this?)

10. Read King Agrippa's response to Paul's speech in verses 24 to 29. Do you think Paul has made any ground with him?
11. Festus and Agrippa agree in verses 31 and 32 that Paul has done nothing deserving death or imprisonment. In fact, if he hadn't appealed to Caesar he could be set free. But Paul sees a greater plan unfolding. How has he described it in verse 22?

A Costly Choice

Paul has been through a Sanhedrin hearing, two Roman trials, and a hearing before King Agrippa, and has spent more than two years in custody. Every time, he's been found innocent of all charges. But Paul has chosen to appeal to Caesar so as to take the gospel to Rome. It's a decision he makes at great personal risk, and huge cost - but in doing it, he's fulfilling the commission given to him by Jesus. In Acts 27-28, we'll follow him on his trip to Rome.

12. What risks and costs are you prepared to face to help bring people from the Kingdom of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins?

Prayer Points

Share any updates on your two non-Christian friends. Pray for them.

ACTS 27-28: ON A MISSION FROM GOD

Paul could have been a free man - but he chose instead to appeal his case to Caesar, because that's where he knew he had been commissioned to preach the gospel. He also knew that his trials and appeals gave him a great opportunity to speak to the leaders and rulers of the Empire.

In Acts 27, Paul is again joined by Luke (the writer of Acts), and also Aristarchus (from Thessalonica, who we first met back in Acts 19). Under the authority of Julius, a Roman Centurion, they set out on a sea voyage filled with danger and adventure.

Read Acts 27-28:10

As you read, notice the account is full of the sort of small details that make you realise it's **real history**...

- people, places, one night stop-overs - complete with accurate travel times
- technical boat-stuff that only boat types will really appreciate; securing the lifeboats, binding under the ship with ropes, lowering the sea anchor, jettisoning cargo, depth soundings, dropping four anchors from the stern, rudders, foresails... every detail of every sandbar and windgust seems to be recorded!

A Few Points to Notice...

1. From the following verses, who is really "in charge" on the ship?
 - v9-10
 - v21-26
 - v31
 - v33
2. Why do you think Paul can exercise such confident leadership?
3. Whose interests does Paul take into account at every point?
4. From verse 24, what is it that keeps Paul and the others on the ship safe from harm?
5. Ashore on Malta, Paul is bitten by a deadly snake. Why isn't he harmed?

Read Acts 28:11-16.

6. Paul has travelled halfway around the known world. But his departure and his arrival have one thing in common. What do you notice in 27:3, 28:13-14 and 28:15?
7. Why do you think Paul was encouraged by the men he meets in 28:15?

Already, the gospel is spreading all over the world! From one side of the empire to the other, Paul links up with Christian brothers who are able to encourage and support him. It's clear evidence that the task Jesus gave his apostles at the beginning of Acts is being carried out successfully - thanks to the power of God's Spirit, who has very effectively prepared the way. More and more Gentiles have responded to the gospel, as well as plenty of Jews. But the situation with the Jews who DON'T accept that Jesus is their Messiah is still tense.

Read Acts 28:17-31.

7. From verse 18, how does Paul view himself, and his gospel?

8. How does he describe the reason for his chains?

9. What is the basis of Paul's message to the Roman Jews?

As usual, some of Paul's hearers are convinced, while others are angry. Maybe Paul's final Old Testament quotation (Isaiah 6:9-10) in verse 26-27 isn't very tactful!

10. What do you see as the significance of the passage Paul quotes in these verses?

Why do you think Luke chooses to leave us with these words (and verse 28)?

What significance would this have had when Acts was first written?

As Paul said in verse 28, God's word HAS been sent to the Gentiles. Paul stayed in Rome in a rented house, boldly preaching the Kingdom of God, teaching that Jesus Christ, who died for our sin and rose as eternal King, is Lord of everyone - Jew and Gentile alike. Paul said, "God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, AND THEY WILL LISTEN."

11. Paul said the Gentiles would listen. So are YOU listening? Read verses 26 and 27 again. Is there a danger that we could make the same mistakes as the people described here?

How do we avoid having "calloused hearts"?

What should the result be of our hearing and seeing of God's word?

What practical steps should we be taking to encourage one another in this?

Prayer Points

Share any updates on your two non-Christian friends. Pray for them.