

To the Ends of the Earth

Acts 13-28



“To the Ends of the Earth” **BIBLE STUDY WEEK**

1

Sent by the *Spirit* Acts 13-14

KEY VERSE: “...I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 13:47)

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: The Holy Spirit sends and confirms our witness in signs and wonders.

Group Discussion

POINT 1: It is the Holy Spirit who sends and equips.

“¹ Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. ⁴ The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.” (Acts 13:1-4)

Acts 13 represents a major turning point in the book of Acts. No longer focused primarily on Jerusalem, the Church is about to fulfill words of the Lord Jesus in Acts 1:8, “...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Indeed, this passage begins with a group of believers who are exercising their spiritual gifts (verse 1), busy doing what the Spirit had equipped them to do. They were active, busy doing God’s will, it is much easier to steer a car that is in motion :) We are told that it is “while they were worshipping” (fasting and praying, verses 2-3) that the Holy Spirit spoke. We don’t know how He spoke, whether through a specific prophetic utterance or through a conviction shared by the group, but we know He spoke clearly, and they obeyed. It was the Spirit’s choice: He chose the workers and He chose the work.

? Can you share an example of hearing the Holy Spirit speak? Are you exercising your gifts in the Body of Christ?

POINT 2: The early Church was able to see the needs of others.

“⁸ In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed ¹⁰ and called out, ‘Stand up on your feet!’ At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. ¹¹ When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in human form!’ ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them. ¹⁴ But when the apostles

Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵‘Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.’ (Acts 14:8-15)

Throughout Chapters 13 and 14 we are told that Paul, “filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at...” the person he was reaching (Acts 13:9, Acts 14:9). This echoes similar accounts in Acts 3 where we are told that Peter “looked straight at him” (Acts 3:4). They were constantly aware of the needs around them, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and not afraid to engage deeply with the brokenness of the person in front of them. The church of Antioch was extremely diverse, reflecting the diversity of the city’s population. This gathering of cultures, racial backgrounds, age groups and walks of life, allowed them to better see the vast needs of their communities. This unity in diversity was a miracle, similar to the diversity described in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit came upon the Church. The community was perfectly equipped by the Holy Spirit to do the work we God had prepared in advance for them to do (Ephesians 2:10).

? What challenges and opportunities are present in a diverse multi-cultural, multi-racial social context like our city?

POINT 3: Our witness should be confirmed by both the word and wonders.

“¹ After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. ²He told them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. ³Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. ⁴Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. ⁵When you enter a house, first say, “Peace to this house.” ⁶If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. ⁷Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. ⁸When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. ⁹Heal those there who are ill and tell them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” (Luke 10:1-9)

The Church in Acts follows the example set by the Lord Jesus. This is evident in the beginning of the book focusing on Peter and John as well as the latter half of the book focusing on the ministry of Paul. In Luke 10, Jesus sent out his disciples to the places “where he was about to go” (Luke 10:1). In reality, because the Church in Acts was the Body of Christ they were physically going everywhere he wanted to go, under the direction of the Holy Spirit. When they went out they preached the word of God. In Acts 13:15-42 Paul gives a powerful sermon using the Old Testament to point to the resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God. After they shared the word, their witness was confirmed by miraculous signs. They expected that their hearers lives would be changed by God’s power. Just as Jesus said, they showed that the kingdom of God was near, by demonstrating the power of God to bring about healing and transformation.

? How can we better show the power of both the word and God’s wonders in our Christian witness?

Encourage One Another

Take time to share with one another how this passage makes you feel. Do you feel hopeful that you can be like the church in Antioch? Do you know what your spiritual gifts are and are you using them? Are you a “car in motion” that the Lord can steer? Are you able to hear the Spirit’s voice? Or do you sometimes feel that you are stuck and that the Lord seems far away? The purpose of a small group or a study partner is to encourage one another, to share our journey together and build one another up. How can the other members of your small group pray for you so that you will experience the same Holy Spirit power in your witness as we see in the Church in Acts 13-14. End your time in prayer for one another, committing this journey together to the Lord!

Jubilee
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2

Crossing *Cultures* Acts 15-16

KEY VERSE: *“It is my judgement, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”* (Acts 15:19)

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: When we pray, God breaks down the barriers of culture to bring others to himself.

Group Discussion

POINT 1: We are called to cross cultures in Jesus name.

“⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.’ ⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: ‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles should hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.’ ¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.” (Acts 15:5-12)

Paul’s second missionary journey required him to trust the leading of the Spirit into new directions. In Acts 15 a cultural issue arose relating to the practice of circumcision, with some believers thought should be required for conversion. James was a respected leader in the early church, he the brother of Jesus and a powerful man of prayer. In fact one 3rd century historian writes that he was called “Old Camel Knees”, because he spent so much time on his knees in prayer. James spoke up in Acts 15:19 saying, “It is my judgement, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” What simple yet powerful words! How often do we make it difficult for others to turn to God, purely because of cultural differences? When outsiders come into our community do they feel like they belong? We must constantly ask ourselves if we are “bridge builders” or “wall builders” in the name of Jesus.

? What cultural obstacles might hinder us from sharing the love of God? What can we do to break these down?

Continued...

POINT 2: God wants to break down barriers to His love.

“¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district[a] of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. ¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. ¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home. ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord,’ she said, ‘come and stay at my house.’ And she persuaded us.” (Acts 16:11-15)

In Acts 16, Luke highlights three stories of the “new thing” that God was doing in the spread of the Gospel. Paul is led by the Holy Spirit to cross into Europe and no sooner did he cross this border, but God showed that he wanted to break down some major cultural barriers. In a traditional Jewish liturgy men would pray, “Blessed are you... who has not made me a gentile, a slave or a woman.” In this passage God chooses an example of each of these to be the first to respond to the Gospel. Lydia is a wealthy business owner and “a worshipper of God” (Acts 16:14). Paul and Silas are looking for a place of prayer on the Sabbath, and instead of finding the traditionally required grouping of 10 adult males, they found Lydia’s ladies. The first believer in Europe was a woman; the second account is of a slave girl who is freed from an evil spirit; the third story is of a Gentile jailer. Please read Galatians 3:26-29.

? What place do women have in the New Testament and how did this challenge the cultural norms of this time?

POINT 3: We experience God’s power when we pray and worship Him.

“²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. ²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, ‘Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!’ ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ ³¹ They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.’” (Acts 16:25-31)

The first example of a radical willingness to cross cultures in Jesus’ name came in Acts 15 with the words of James, a man of prayer. Later Paul and Silas were on their way to a “place of prayer” when they met Lydia (Acts 16:13) and the slave girl (Acts 16:16). In Acts 16:22 the crowd turns against them and they are thrown into prison. Paul could have immediately claimed his rights as a Roman citizen (as he does in Acts 16:37), instead we find him and Silas in the inner cell of the prison having a midnight hymn-sing! (Acts 16:25) Instead of focusing on their problems these men are focusing on the power of their God. When they are miraculously released, their jailer is afraid for his life. The result is that an entire family is transformed by the saving power of Jesus Christ. Just like Lydia, all the members of his household believe and are baptized (Acts 16:15, 33-34) and this jailer was filled with joy!

? Are you facing a desperate situation, discouragement or fear? Prayer and praise will unlock God’s power in your situation.

Encourage One Another

Take time to share with one another what strikes you about this passage. Is there a cultural barrier that you feel called to cross in Jesus’ name? Do you have a burden for someone who seems hindered from responding to the Gospel? Just like Lydia, the Lord is able to open other’s hearts to receive our message (Acts 15:14). We can be like the the Apostle Paul, willing to cross cultural barriers, to be “bridge builders” to the love of God. Are you praying for your whole family to be saved just as Lydia and the Gentile jailor experienced? Take time to share in your small group, and pray for one another that God will show His power. He is raising up men and women of prayer and faith, to continue to cross the barriers of culture and gender and background in His name!

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3

God is not Far *Away* Acts 17

KEY VERSE: “God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though He is not far from each one of us.” (Acts 17:27)

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: The Holy Spirit will help us to break down barriers in order to help others find Him.

Group Discussion

POINT 1: Trusting God in the face of adversity is a powerful witness.

“¹When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ²As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. ⁴Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women... ¹⁰As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. ¹²As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.” (Acts 17:1-4, 10-12)

Paul and his companions continued with their second missionary journey, despite being expelled from Philippi. Paul held on to his clear call to Macedonia and until the Spirit led in another direction, they would persevere. While they experienced some opposition in Thessalonica, the response in Berea was a great encouragement to them. In Acts 17 we learn that they “received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day”. This chapter provides us with such a great example of trusting God with the response to our message. Read John 13:33, Jesus offers us his peace and while it is true that “in this world (we) will have trouble”, we can take heart because He has overcome the world. Maybe there is encouragement just around the corner? After all, the message of the early disciples did in fact eventually reach “to the ends of the earth”!

? How can we help one another experience Jesus’ peace in the middle of the “trouble” of this world?

POINT 2: God will provide a “bridge” to share His love with others.

“¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them

asked, “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” ²¹(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) ²²Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.” (Acts 17:16-23)

In Athens Paul experienced great distress in what he found. Are you sometimes overwhelmed with distress when you take a good look at the world around you? Broken families, fearful colleagues, inner pain, sickness, depression, anxiety, poverty... the sources of distress are many. Remember that God sends us to be “salt and light” (Matthew 5) in a world that desperately needs His love. Because we have the presence of the Holy Spirit, His burdens become ours and the load is often heavy to bear. This is why we need one another. In our next chapter Paul goes to Corinth, later he would write to them about “the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Paul’s distress eventually gives way to a “bridge” for the Gospel to be preached. In their idol worship and idle talk, he finds a key to unlock the message of the “unknown God” who wants to be known. God helped Paul to turn His distress into a message that would reach the people of Athens.

? What aspect of our world leaves you feeling distressed? Can this trouble provide a bridge for the Gospel?

POINT 3: God wants people everywhere to reach out and find Him.

“²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸For in him we live and move and have our being.’ ^bAs some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’” (Acts 17:22-28)

I once heard the niece of the great Martin Luther King Jr. speak on this passage. Right there on the evening news she explained what her uncle, visionary civil rights activist and Baptist preacher taught her, that “Acts 17:26 means that we are not separate races. God created all people... It’s a sin to differentiate people by skin color or money or any of the human conditions that we have. The human race has been in the condition of being a fallen group of people in a fallen world. The answer to that is always Jesus Christ. Sin is sin. It is a sin to see our brothers and sisters as other races when we are all of one race, the human race... So, the issue of racism, socially engineered to divide us, is sinful.” This is not just a political issue, the sin of racism is rampant in every nation on earth, and as we go “to the ends of the earth” we must confront systemic racism in all its forms.

? Can you share a personal experience of racism or another form of discrimination? How did this make you feel?

Encourage One Another

As we approach the celebration of Pentecost, we can trust that the Holy Spirit will help us to help one another in our troubles, as we receive help from Him (2 Cor 1). Paul was distressed by the sins and brokenness of the city of Athens. We too should be distressed when we see the brokenness of our world. Sometimes it’s scary to talk about subjects like racism... Will I be misunderstood, will I say the wrong thing? But God wants to make Himself known to each one of us right there in the reality of our personal experience. He is not far from any of us, and He will help us reach out to one another with His love. He has a purpose in bringing together His Church “from every nation” (Acts 2:5) which cannot be achieved in uniformity and sameness. Let’s pray that the Lord Jesus will build His Church, and trust that He will break down any walls that have been designed to divide us.

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4

We Need the *Holy Spirit* Acts 18

KEY VERSE: “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.” (Acts 2:1)

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: The Holy Spirit encourages us, empowers us and connects us to one another.

Group Discussion

POINT 1: The Holy Spirit provides open doors.

“When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. ⁶But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” ⁷Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. ⁸Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized. ⁹One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” ¹¹So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.” (Acts 18:5-11)

Moving on from Athens, we learn in 1 Corinthians 2:3 that Paul went to Corinth in “weakness and fear, and with much trembling”. Corinth was known to be a city of great excess and immorality, particularly full of rampant sexual sin. Paul knew that preaching Christ to these people would be difficult and that he would likely face intense persecution and rejection. Upon his arrival, God first provided a welcoming couple recently arrived from Italy, Priscilla and Aquila, who were in the same business as Paul (they were tentmakers). Later, when Paul faced opposition from the Jewish community, he moved his preaching from the synagogue to the house next door. When God allows for one door to be closed, he always opens another according to His perfect will. Imagine the surprise when the synagogue ruler and his whole family came next-door and believed in Jesus.

? Have you experienced a “closed door” in your life? Did God open another way? Are you trusting him to do so?

POINT 2: The Holy Spirit encourages us.

“Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. ¹⁵If you love me, keep my commands. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— ¹⁷the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you

and will be in you. ¹⁸I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. ²¹Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.” (John 14:12-21)

In John 14 Jesus wanted to encourage His disciples, He said, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor (comforter, helper, advocate) to help you and be with you forever... I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” To be orphaned is to be alone, but God gives us His Spirit to encourage us, the Spirit is God’s constant presence with us. In the first section of Acts 18, Paul receives a vision from the Lord. He was a man like us, who sometimes experienced discouragement and fear. When the Lord appears to Paul, he encourages him to not be afraid and to keep on speaking. This reveals that Paul was experiencing fear. This is why the Lord appeared to him. The Lord comes alongside us in our discouragement, and He wants us to know that He is with us. His words are tender and gracious, Do not be afraid, keep on speaking... I am with you, and no-one is going to harm you...(Acts 18:9-10). Then the Lord reminded Paul that He “had many people in this city”. They had not yet all become Christians, but they too would believe and receive the Holy Spirit.

? Have you faced discouragement or fear this week? Have you felt the presence of the Holy Spirit?

POINT 3: God’s Spirit connects us to one another.

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹(both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (Acts 1:1-11)

This week we celebrated the “birthday” of the Church. Jesus was crucified during the feast of Passover (Leviticus 23), rose from the dead as a fulfillment of the feast of Firstfruits (1 Corinthians 15:23) and promised that “in a few days” His disciples would receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). The Holy Spirit came at the feast of Pentecost. Pentecost is a Greek word that means fifty because according to the calendar set by the Lord more than 1500 years before Jesus’ birth, it was to be celebrated fifty days after the Passover feast. Exactly 50 days after Passover, when the Holy Spirit came, he took 120 people who were gathered into one place, and made them one. Here were people from “every nation under heaven”, isolated individuals who had been living their lives quite separately, held together only by a mutual interest in Jesus Christ. But now they are baptized by the Spirit into one body. First there was an outward demonstration as the tongues of fire separated and came to rest on each of them, then came the inward reality that they were united in the Body of Christ.

? Have you been growing in connection with others members of the Body of Christ? How is our “oneness” part of our witness?

Encourage One Another

As we remember the celebration of Pentecost, we can remind one another that our power to be witnesses comes directly from the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God will equip us to go “to the ends of the earth”. When we face discouragement and persecution, the Spirit will comfort us, and He equips us to comfort one another with the comfort we have received from Him (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). The Church is a miraculous community, bringing together diverse men and women from “every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). Take time to encourage one another to see the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit in each other’s lives. Jesus prayed that we would be “one” (John 17:20-21), and we are indeed one in the Spirit. Pray together to thank the Lord for His Spirit who empowers us, encourages us, and connects us with one another.

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5

Called to *Go* Acts 20

KEY VERSE: “...if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given to me.” (Acts 20:24)

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: The Holy Spirit calls each of us and helps us to step out in obedience and trust.

Group Discussion

POINT 1: Paul trusted the leading of the Holy Spirit.

“Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost. ¹⁷ From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. ¹⁸ When they arrived, he said to them: ‘You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. ¹⁹ I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. ²⁰ You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ²¹ I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. ²² ‘And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴ However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace. ²⁵ ‘Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.” (Acts 20:16-25)

Paul stayed for five years in Corinth and Ephesus. During this time he experienced tremendous results from his work but also great opposition. In Acts 20:18, Paul reminds the leaders of the church in Ephesus that his witness was clear, “from the first day came into the province of Asia”. Paul started well. Whenever we are led to a new place of calling, it is important to start well, to establish a clear witness right from the outset. Paul also finished well, and Acts 20 gives us a beautiful glimpse at Paul’s heart for His spiritual family in Ephesus. In Acts 20:22 we read that Paul left because he was “compelled by the Spirit”. From verse 24 he shares his perspective, “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given to me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace”.

? Do you have a sense of God’s calling on your life? Did your move to Geneva (or from Geneva) result in a new area of calling?

POINT 2: We must not allow ourselves to be paralyzed by fear, for ourselves or for one another.

“‘When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.’ Then he said to them: ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. ¹² ‘But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will

be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. ¹³ And so you will bear testimony to me. ¹⁴ But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. ¹⁵ For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict...” (Luke 21:9-15)

Paul knew that he was in the place of God’s calling. He listened to the leading of the Holy Spirit and obeyed what he was called to do. In Acts 20:23, we read that he said, “I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.” In Acts 21 Paul received a prophetic word from one of the brothers confirming the suffering waiting for him in Jerusalem. Read Acts 21:10-14. It is normal that Paul’s brothers and sisters wanted to protect him from harm, but we also need to be able to trust the Lord, and come alongside one another in what He has called us to do. We must not become people who are driven by fear. When I was 10 years old my Dad received a call to serve the Lord and we left our big Italian family to serve the Lord and plant a new church. Why? Because it was the “safe” option? No, because Dad knew that this was the Lord’s calling on his life, and that the Lord would protect and bless us. We need to help one another to step out in faith, and turn away from fear. We must do as the Lord Jesus said in Luke 21:14, we must “make up our minds not to worry beforehand”.

? Have you experienced fear in stepping out into God’s calling on your life? Have you faced suffering?

POINT 3: We must be careful to not rely on human wisdom, but to obey the Spirit’s voice.

“What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, ²³ so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. ²⁴ Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law... ²⁷ When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, ²⁸ shouting, ‘Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place.’ ²⁹ (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.) ³⁰ The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. ³¹ While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. ³² He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.” (Acts 21: 22-24, 27-32)

Paul was convinced that the Holy Spirit had told him to go to Jerusalem and that suffering awaited him there. When Agabus confirmed this, the believers interpreted it was a warning for Paul not to go. Is it possible that we too, sometime out of legitimate concern for others, deflect them from the path of God’s calling on their lives? Do we trust God to protect our brothers and sisters, our children, our loved ones? Even after Paul arrived in Jerusalem, the leaders there were trying to protect him, unfortunately by taking steps to appease the legalist crowd. They were quick to share the rumors about Paul out of a desire to “protect” him. These accusations were of course baseless, similar to those brought against Jesus and Stephen. We too may sometimes be tempted to protect ourselves by conforming to prevailing human wisdom, but we can help one another to trust God even when we are misunderstood or falsely accused. When we trust the Lord, we can expect that He may use even the most expected means to provide for us, just as he did with Paul.

? Have you been misunderstood or falsely accused in your witness, or in your obedience to God?

Encourage One Another

There is no greater blessing than to know that we are walking in the paths of obedience to God’s calling on our lives. When we are in the place of His calling we can rest secure. As a church community we can help one another to step out in faith, to be a clear witness in our homes, our place of work, or study, with our friends and colleagues. The Apostle Paul was a man like us, he experienced discouragement and fear and we, like Paul, may experience hardships, loss, suffering and persecution. If we expect these, we can decide in advance that we will not give into fear, and instead that we will stand firm. Take some time to pray for each other, and thank the Lord for His Spirit who guides us and gives us strength to walk in obedience in community with one another.

To the Ends of the Earth

Acts 13-28



“To the Ends of the Earth” **BIBLE STUDY WEEK**

6

Faith under *Fire* Acts 22-23

KEY VERSE: *"The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage!" (Acts 23:11)*

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: It is the Lord who calls us, prepares us, encourages us and protects us by His power.

Group Discussion

POINT 1: Paul tried to keep unity by accommodating to the views of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

²⁶ *The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.* ²⁷ *When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him,* ²⁸ *shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place."* ²⁹ *(They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.)* ³⁰ *The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. (Acts 21:26-30)*

Ephesians 4:3 says that we should, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." When Paul arrived in Jerusalem the Jewish leaders asked him to make such an effort to allay the concerns of the recently converted Jewish believers. He could have been offended that even as he was sharing the amazing "new thing" that God was doing in bringing many Gentiles to faith, they were insisting on focusing on the Jewish converts to Jesus. Instead, he listened to the sensitivities of the leadership in Jerusalem, and agreed to a plan to keep peace with those who misunderstood his ministry. In the end however, the real problem was that the mob was unwilling to welcome the "new thing" God was doing. There is no evidence that Paul actually welcomed Gentiles into the Temple, which was punishable by death. But their accusation was true on a least one level. Paul was indeed welcoming the Gentiles into God's presence through the Lord Jesus. Later in his letter to the Galatian believers he would write, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28).

? Have you ever had to "accommodate" to the views of others in order to maintain unity?

POINT 2: Paul was sustained by a close personal relationship with the Lord Jesus.

⁶ *"About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?'" ⁸ "Who are you, Lord?" I asked. " 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. ¹⁰ "What shall I do, Lord?" I asked. " 'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus.*

There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.¹² “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there.¹³ He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.¹⁴ “Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth.¹⁵ You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.¹⁶ And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.’ (Acts 22:6-16)

Last week we discussed the protection that God provided for Paul through an unlikely source. We read in Acts 21:23 that the rioters stopped beating him when they saw the Roman commander and his soldiers. When he speaks, after describing his background, he shares his testimony with the people. In a courtroom a "witness" gives "testimony" only of what he or she has seen and heard. It would be inappropriate to give "testimony" of something someone else has experienced. As Ananias says in Acts 22:15, Paul was a witness "...of what (he) had seen and heard." Paul's testimony centers on his relationship with the risen Christ. Indeed, in chapters 22 and 23, Paul has three visions of the Lord Jesus. In Acts 22:6-10 he recounts his calling by the Lord Jesus himself on the Road to Damascus. In Acts 22:17-21 he describes Jesus warning to him that he should leave Jerusalem. And finally, in Acts 23:11, he describes a night vision when the Lord stood near him and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

? What significant experiences with Jesus can you look back on for encouragement when your faith is tested?

POINT 3: God provided protection for Paul by ensuring that he would have the rights of a Roman citizen.

¹⁹ The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, “What is it you want to tell me?”²⁰ He said: “Some Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him.²¹ Don’t give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request.”²² The commander dismissed the young man with this warning: “Don’t tell anyone that you have reported this to me.”²³ Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, “Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen^b to go to Caesarea at nine tonight.²⁴ Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix.”²⁵ He wrote a letter as follows:²⁶ Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings.²⁷ This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen.²⁸ I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin.²⁹ I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. (Acts 23:19-29)

Much of the New Testament commentary on the government comes to us from the Apostle Paul. This passage gives us a window into the personal experience of Paul with the governing authorities and the law. In chapter 23 there was division between the Jewish leaders about what Paul was saying. Paul was after all a Pharisee, the faction of the Jewish faith that believed in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees believed that there would be no resurrection for those who had died (this explains why they were "sad you see" :) In the end, a group of evil men plotted to kill him with no justification under Jewish or Roman law. When he learned of this plot Paul appealed to the authorities based on his rights as a Roman citizen. We too have basic rights that are protected under the law to hold to our beliefs and faith. Are we aware of the basis of these rights in law, and could we claim them if necessary? The governing authorities of Paul's time were far from perfect, but Paul knew his rights and received wisdom as to when to exercise them (read Romans 13:1 and 1 Peter 2:13-5).

? Are believers generally effective in knowing their rights and exercising them when necessary?
What can we learn from the Apostle Paul?

Encourage One Another

Jubilee rest, return, release

Sometimes as believers we act as if we are "helpless" but nothing could be further from the truth. Just like the Apostle Paul we have the constant presence of the Lord Jesus with us, guiding us and protecting us. We no longer depend on our national identity to have the right to enter into God's presence in a temple made of stones. Instead we are being built into a temple made of living stones, which includes men and women from every nation on earth (read Ephesians 2:19-22). Take time to listen to one another - is anyone feeling "helpless" in your group? We have the presence of the Holy Spirit who is always with us and we have one another. The Lord has prepared us for the task that He has set before us and He will give us what we need when our faith is under fire. Remember that the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed less than a decade after this passage was written - the temple of the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, stands stronger than ever!

To the Ends of the Earth

Acts 13-28



“To the Ends of the Earth” **BIBLE STUDY WEEK**

7

Powerful Encounters Acts 24-26

KEY VERSE: "I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man." (Acts 24:16)

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: Every personal contact with others is an opportunity to share the hope we have.

Group Discussion

POINT 1: The Apostle Paul did not waiver from his calling even in the face of great opposition.

¹⁰ When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: "I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. ¹¹ You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. ¹² My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. ¹³ And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. ¹⁴ However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, ¹⁵ and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. ¹⁶ So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man. (Acts 24:10-16)

At the end of Acts 23, we find Paul being transported to appear before the Roman authorities in the coastal town of Caesarea. How incredible that almost 500 soldiers were needed to accompany one accused man (Acts 23:23-24). Paul was well aware of his rights as a Roman citizen, but here we find him up against the Jewish legal system as well as that of the Roman occupying force. One might expect that Paul would be intimidated by this series of high-powered encounters, but Paul relished every opportunity to share his faith with his listeners, "great and small" (Acts 26:22). I read an article last week about a high-school chaplain who was suspended from his position and placed on a UK counter-terrorism watch list because, in the context of the school's policies on sexuality, he had taught his students that they were not compelled "to accept an ideology they disagree with". The charges were later dropped, and today he is even more determined to encourage students to think for themselves. We will not always be understood when we take a stand for our beliefs, but we must always be prepared to give a reason for our hope (read 1 Peter 3:13-16).

? Have you ever been misunderstood or mistreated because of your personal beliefs? Did you respond with "gentleness and respect"?

POINT 2: Paul rested on the sovereignty of God even when things might have seemed hopeless.

²² Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. "When Lysias the commander comes," he said, "I will decide your case." ²³ He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs. ²⁴ Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ As Paul talked about righteousness,

self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." ²⁶ At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. ²⁷ When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison. (Acts 24:22-27)

Based on what we have studied about the Apostle Paul, can you imagine how hard it would have been for Paul to be held in prison for more than two years? Ephesians 6 gives us a glimpse into Paul's perspective during these times of confinement (read Ephesians 6:19-20). After all, as Ananias said in Acts 22:15, Paul had been called to be a witness to "all men of what you have seen and heard", so why not take this opportunity to be a witness to the guards, other prisoners, lawyers and governing authorities? Paul was uniquely qualified to speak to the latter, and during his time in Caesarea he appeared before several "high-fliers". But while others might have been impressed by these encounters with "power-players", Paul was secure in the power and sovereignty of God. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:14, Paul "did not fear what they feared". The authorities were confused, Paul was confident (read Acts 25:18-22).

? How do you think Paul felt during his time as a prisoner? How would you feel?

POINT 3: Paul was prepared to give a reason for his hope and willing to share his faith with anyone who would listen.

²² But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— ²³ that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles." ²⁴ At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." ²⁵ "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. ²⁶ The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." ²⁸ Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" ²⁹ Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." ³⁰ The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. ³¹ After they left the room, they began saying to one another, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment." ³² Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar." (Acts 26:22-32)

I love this passage of Acts. Really, just think about it, here is a guy in prison for 2 years for something he didn't do, desiring to travel and meet people but confined in prison. And yet, he says "I have had God's help to this very day". I can imagine that that statement alone would have confused both his accusers and the judge :) This passage shows the irony that prolonged trials and changing power-players only gave Paul a broader audience to preach the Good News of Jesus. We have glimpses of God's sovereignty when we read that Felix was "well acquainted with the Way", a friend perhaps who had shared with him, a servant in his household, a family member? In any case, he showed Paul favor by giving him some measure of freedom and letting his friends care for his needs (Acts 24:23). In the passage above King Agrippa asks an amazing question, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" I love it! Was Paul tempted to respond, "Maybe not, but maybe my accusers will prompt another few hours, and that should do it!?" In the end, Agrippa says he would have freed him if he had not appealed to Caesar (read Proverbs 21:1).

? What aspect of your "hope" do you think people most need to hear? If you could have access to anyone, who would you speak to?

Encourage One Another

We are coming to the end of our study in the Book of Acts, next week will be our last session together in this book. As we conclude this study, what aspects of Paul's life and calling do you personally find most inspirational? Take time to share with one another your desires to share your witness with those around you, in your workplace, in your home and school. Will this summer open up new doors for you to speak to others about your relationship with Jesus? Ephesians 5:15 says we should live carefully, wisely, "making the most of every opportunity". The Apostle Paul certainly did this, and so can we! Take time to pray for one another and encourage one another to rest in the sovereignty of God and seek Spirit-filled wisdom to know how to share with others. The Lord has equipped us for the task and He has prepared the hearts of those who will listen. Share any new boldness you have experienced in your desire to be a witness "to the ends of the earth"!

To the Ends of the Earth

Acts 13-28



“To the Ends of the Earth” **BIBLE STUDY WEEK**

8

Shipwrecks and *Sovereignty* Acts 27

KEY VERSE: *"But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost..."* (Acts 27:22)

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: We will have courage when we know who we belong to, who we serve, and where we are headed.

Group Discussion

POINT 1: Just like the Apostle Paul, we can be a source of hope to those around us who are facing fear and disappointment.

¹³ When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. ¹⁴ Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. ¹⁵ The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. ¹⁶ As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure, ¹⁷ so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor[b] and let the ship be driven along. ¹⁸ We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. ¹⁹ On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. ²⁰ When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved. (Acts 27:13-20)

We can claim many promises from scripture, but none of them give us assurance that we will never experience trouble in the Christian life. In fact the scripture promises quite the opposite. Psalm 34 says "A righteous man may have many troubles..." and Jesus himself promised "In this world you will have trouble..." But along with the "promises" of trouble, God assures of His power to deliver us. The Apostle Paul had warned these sailors that disaster was on the way (verse 10), but they thought they had gotten "what they wanted" (verse 13) favorable winds, a ship full of valuable grain which would make them rich and prosperous. Seven verses later they had thrown everything but the grain overboard, including what they needed to navigate the ship. This is a picture of extreme hopelessness.

? Are you aware of those around you who may have faced trouble when, having gotten "what they wanted", they find themselves facing extreme loss and disappointment? Have you faced this yourself?

POINT 2: Paul rested on the sovereignty of God and wanted others to experience the courage and confidence that he had in the Lord.

²¹ After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. ²² But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. ²³ Last night an angel of the God to

whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me ²⁴ and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' ²⁵ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. ²⁶ Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island." (Acts 27:21-26)

Paul had a confidence that the others on the ship lacked. As we face the challenges of the future, we often are "in the same boat" as those around us, but we have a different hope. During this past year of pandemic, many around us have been overwhelmed by fear, anxiety, depression, personal brokenness. Even believers in Jesus have faced trouble, but in the words of one pastor, "we've been fine, over (not under) the circumstances". Paul's promise of trouble also included a promise of deliverance that "not one of you will be lost" (verse 22). As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:14, Paul "did not fear what they feared" because he recognized Jesus Christ as Lord, he rested in the sovereignty of God. His message was not a spiteful "I told you so", but a life-giving word that they should "keep up (their) courage, because not one of (them) would be lost". Verse 24 shows us that Paul knew 1) who he belonged to, 2) who he served, and 3) where he was headed. He also knew that "being in the same boat" with him would ultimately bring a blessing of deliverance to everyone else (read Psalm 34:17-20).

? Are you aware of who you belong to, who you serve and where you are going? Do you believe the Lord will bring deliverance to others through you?

POINT 3: Paul's experience of trusting God in times of trouble brought about transformation in the lives of those around him.

³⁰ In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. ³¹ Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." ³² So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away. ³³ Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven't eaten anything." ³⁴ Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." ³⁵ After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. ³⁶ They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. ³⁷ Altogether there were 276 of us on board. ³⁸ When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea. (Acts 27:30-38)

This final section of the passage reveals the character of these people. When they first sailed into a dangerous situation they were motivated by profit to get that valuable grain to Rome. Their desire for riches had driven them to make very poor choices. Now, not only were they willing to abandon the grain but the other passengers on board, selfishly attempting to escape on a lifeboat. Situations of trouble reveal our character as well, and we can learn from this passage how to turn away from fear, and stay focused on the Lord's power. Paul brought the reality of resurrection life into his experience of every day life. In this passage, he warns them gently that the promise of protection would only come in obeying the Lord's word, then he reminds them that they will also need to eat to survive. He took bread and gave thanks, a clear picture of the Lord's supper, his death and resurrection. The result was that many lives were saved and all who shared in this meal were encouraged. In the end, they "lightened" their load by tossing all of that oh-so-valuable grain into the sea. Their perspective had changed, they too would never be the same again.

? Read James 1:7. Are you facing a storm right now, do you need to receive power, show love, or exercise self-control under pressure?

Encourage One Another

We have been on a journey together in the book of Acts, and with this lesson we are coming to an end of our study together. Of course, we know that learning is not about reading or even discussing, but learning comes in doing and coming alongside one another in practicing what we have studied. Take time to share with one another some of the highlights of these last 8 weeks, and how you desired to grow in what you have studied together. Read James 1:2-5. In today's passage, we've learned about the dangers of making poor decisions based on a desire for wealth or self-preservation. Take time to pray for one another and encourage one another to rest in the sovereignty of God. Are any of us in need of wisdom in a specific circumstance? Let's pray together, believing that God will give generously. Let's commit to coming alongside one another in times of trouble, so we be a source of blessing to others. Let's rejoice together in our trials, because God is making us more complete and mature in Him. Take time to thank the Lord for the oneness that we have in Christ, a oneness that brings blessing (Psalm 133). Our oneness will be a powerful witness of the resurrection life of Jesus "to the ends of the earth"!