

Study on ACTS

Paul's 3 Missionary Journeys (ACTS 13:1 - 21:16)

Key Text:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth". (Acts 1:8)

PART 1 – THE GUIDING HAND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Acts of the Apostles chronicles much of the birth and spread of the early church. This spread would not have been possible without the empowering and guidance provided by the Holy Spirit. In fact, it has been suggested that the book could be aptly renamed the "Acts of the Holy Spirit" since it does in fact detail much of how the Holy Spirit guides and empowers the church for service.

What is interesting is to consider if the broad strokes by which God worked through Paul and the early church are ways which are also applicable for us in the 21st century.

1.1 PREPARING THE GROUND FOR THE GOSPEL

- The call of Paul

Few of us would doubt that Paul was a very unique individual. In a world where Roman citizenship was uncommon, Paul was not only a Roman citizen, but a devout Jew. One trained under an exceptional master, and one who himself was recognized for his religious zeal. Paul's contribution to Gentile mission cannot be underestimated. And yet, we must continually see that Paul himself, is the product of other Christian believers, chiefly Barnabas who put his trust in Paul's conversion (Acts 9:26-27), and even Ananias whose simple obedience removed the scales from Paul's eyes (Acts 9:17-18).

- The Holy Spirit fill the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48, 15:8)

It is hard to underestimate the influence of this act. Judaism had always been a religion for the Jews, and Christianity springing from its Jewish roots shared much of the same bias as its predecessors. The baptism of the Holy Spirit proved beyond a shadow of doubt that God accepted the gentiles into the community of faith.

- The Gospel and God's Sovereign Timing.

It is not difficult to see the beauty of God's timing. In choosing to come when he did, the gospel found a fertile ground in which it could spread. The peace afforded by Rome, the unified language, and the Roman roads gave a new and unparalleled access into many parts of the world which would otherwise not have been reachable.

1.2 CALLING AND DIRECTING PEOPLE IN MINISTRY

- Barnabas and Saul set apart by the Holy Spirit for ministry (Acts 13:2-4)

Paul and Barnabas received a specific call from the Holy Spirit to be set apart for his work. We are not told how the Holy Spirit directed the church to set aside Paul and Barnabas, and we also cannot assume that they knew immediately what was to be done. Ultimately, it is God who calls us into ministry, and his call once discerned, requires our obedient response.

- The Holy Spirit prevents Paul from ministering deeper into Asia, Bithynia and directs them instead to work in Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10). Later, the Holy Spirit's prompts Paul to head to Rome after going to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21, 20:16, 20:22)

Paul could not have known what his scope of work would have been from the start. As with most people, we start with what we are familiar with, before venturing slowly into things less familiar. We are not told why Paul was interested in Bithynia; perhaps it was simply less foreign. Europe was a whole different continent with different cultures. Whether in Bithynia, Macedonia, or Rome, what we see in Paul's life is his willingness to let the Holy Spirit define the scope of his work.

1.3 EQUIPPING, EMPOWERING, and ENCOURAGING

- Equipping for ministry

Even given Paul's credentials, it would be a mistake to assume that Paul felt completely at ease to do all that God required of him. In fact, we must assume that Paul's very credentials were all part of God's plan to equip him for the ministry to which he was later called.

Even despite Paul's credentials, the situations which he faced were often extraordinary. Where did he learn the wisdom he needed to teach and preach the gospel? Where did he gain the courage to persevere when he was faced with persecution? Or where did he learn how to rejoice when he was shackled in a jail? We may attribute these things to his human ability, but in all likelihood, it was the equipping that God provided even as Paul obeyed God's command.

- Empowered for ministry

While Paul's ministry was primarily the sharing of the gospel to the Gentiles, his testimony is reinforced by the empowering of the Holy Spirit. This can be seen from his exercise of spiritual authority (Acts 13:9-11, 16:16-18), and from the miracles that accompanied his ministry (Acts 16:25-40, 19:11-12, 20:7-12)

- Encouraged for ministry

One of the characteristics of Paul's ministry was the presence of opposition. Because of Christianity's radical stance on many issues, opposition is the natural response of those who do not believe in Christianity. Opposition and persecution are difficult to endure, and in its own way, the power and authority exercised by Paul served to vindicate his ministry. Acts 18 records a specific word of encouragement to Paul while he was in Corinth (Acts 18:9-10). Later the spirit foretells his imprisonment, which would serve as an encouragement to him when he actually was imprisoned (Acts 20:23, 21:11) i.e. that his imprisonment was a part of God plan for his life.

PART 2 – BEING ATTENTIVE TO GOD’S GUIDING HAND IN PAUL’S LIFE

In this section we want to examine key people and events which played a major role in Paul’s ministry (especially during the 3 missionary journeys)

2.1 SIGNIFICANT PEOPLE IN PAUL’S 3 MISSIONARY JOURNEYS

- BARNABAS

“Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” - (Acts 4:36-37)

Strictly speaking, Barnabas is first introduced to the reader in the beginning of Acts. Barnabas was the first one to trust in Paul (Acts 9:27), and it’s likely that it was his trust which not only enabled Paul to develop in his ministry, but also demonstrated to the apostle that Paul was somebody who could be trusted.

Barnabas demonstrated a nurturing and encouraging spirit, which not only helped Paul to mature to his full capability, but later also helped John Mark to also make meaningful contributions to the early church. It was likely that John Mark wrote the first gospel – the Gospel according to Mark. Paul later also attests to Mark’s faithful service (2 Tim 4:11, Phm 1:24)

- TIMOTHY

“A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium.” – Acts 16:1-2

The second missionary journey is where first hear of Timothy. Timothy had a Greek father, and a Jewish mother. While mixed marriages within the Jewish community were frowned upon, the children were still to be raised as Jews. Timothy was not circumcised at birth, and was later circumcised so that he could accompany Paul on his missionary journey.

Strictly speaking, Timothy does not receive great mention within the book of Acts. Instead, Timothy is significant because of his close relationship to Paul. Paul calls him his “true child in the faith” (1 Tim 1:2) and his “beloved child” (2 Tim 1:2) - Clearly Paul saw himself as a spiritual mentor and father to this young man.

Within the book of Acts, Timothy role was mainly to strengthen the churches in places like Thessalonica, and Corinth. By the time of writing the letters of 1st and 2nd Timothy, Timothy is leading the church in Ephesus.

2.2 SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN THE 3 MISSIONARY JOURNEYS

- THE CONVERSION OF SERGIUS PAULUS (Proconsul of Cyprus)

“Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.” – Acts 13:12

During the rule of Rome, certain provinces had their control transferred from the Roman Senate and given autonomy in governance. These governors had both military and judicial authority in the provinces, and were known as proconsuls.

The book of Acts tells us that during Paul's missionary journey to Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Cyprus witnesses the power of the Holy Spirit, and come to put his faith in God (Acts 13:7-12). The conversion of such a high profile person would have been a significant encouragement to Paul in his missionary effort.

- 12 GOOD MEN

"And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all." – Acts 19:6-7

Acts 19 tells us the story of some disciples who were baptized into John's baptism. On questioning them, Paul discovers that they had not even heard of the Holy Spirit, this probably means that these men were not Jews since the Holy Spirit is mentioned even in the Old Testament. Paul proceeds to baptize them in the name of Jesus, and after laying hands on them, these men were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

We are not told anymore about these men, we do not know their names, or their exploits. But we note this, the Holy Spirit descending resulting in speaking in tongues is only recorded three times in the book of Acts. The first on the day of Pentecost, the second at the household of Cornelius, and this is the third. Furthermore, Luke explicitly records that there were 12 men in all (Acts 19:7). So while we do not have explicit proof about what these men went on to do, we can use our imagination even as we can remember another story of 12 men (Apostles) who were baptized in the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, spoke in tongues, and went on to shake the world with the truth of the gospel.

- VICTORY OVER THE ENEMY

"And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled." – Acts 19:17

One of the factors which Paul had to face in his ministry was the presence of those who practiced magic. Peter and John faced this in the form of Simon the magician (Acts 8:9-25), and Paul faced this in the form of Elymas the false prophet (Acts 13:7-12), and the girl with the spirit of divination (Acts 16:16-18). In every case, the apostles exercise their authority in the spiritual realm and overcome the opposition against them.

Interestingly, one of the most powerful accounts of God's power in this area occurs without the apostle's intervention. While Paul was at Ephesus, some men – seven sons of the high priest Sceva, begin to practice exorcism "by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims" (Acts 19:13). This statement makes it very clear that they did not believe in Jesus personally, but sought to use the name "Jesus" as a talisman or charm over evil spirits.

Using this method, it's possible that these sons encountered some measure of initial success. But ultimately they encounter a spirit who acknowledges the authority of Jesus and Paul, but rejects their false authority. This spirit then overpowers them, and sends them fleeing naked and wounded. The result of this incident is that all of Ephesus comes to hear about it, and the name of Jesus is extolled. Most importantly, many who practiced magic repent, and bring forth their books and burn them (the value of these books was estimated at almost 137 years wages!)

- INCREASED OPPOSITION, EVER-SUFFICIENT GRACE

And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people. – Acts 18:9-10

We have noted before that Paul often faced opposition in the course of his ministry. Such opposition came in many forms like practitioners of magic (Acts 13:6-10), Jewish and Gentile opposition (Acts 13:45, 14:4-6, 17:5-7, 17:13, 18:6, 19:9, 19:24-29), to physical opposition like stoning and imprisonment (Acts 14:19, 16:19-24, 20:3).

In every case, the opposition is used by God to direct Paul (in terms of his route), to demonstrate his power (as in the magicians and the Philippian jailor), or to provide added means for the gospel to spread. With regards to the last point, Acts 18 tells us about Paul's ministry in Corinth. While there, Paul was brought before the proconsul Gallio on charges of breaking the law.

We note firstly that a verdict by a Roman Governor would not only have consequences within his province, but it would also set the precedence for other provinces. Furthermore, Gallio's brother (Seneca) occupied a position of influence in the imperial court. Other governors would be naturally attentive to the activities and judgments made by Gallio.

In releasing his judgment, Gallio declares that the issues raised by the Jews were a matter of religion and not law (Acts 18:14-16), and that Christianity posed no legal threat to Roman rule and law. This meant in effect that Paul and his associates, so long as they did not breach of public order, continued to share the protection granted by Roman law to Judaism. It should be noted that later charges against Paul were not so much against Christianity, but against Paul as an individual.

PART 3 – A quick look at two cities where Paul ministered extensively

During his missionary journeys, Paul stayed the longest in the city of Corinth (for 18 months, Acts 18:11) and Ephesus (for two years, Acts 19:10). He chose places which were major urban centres: the large population and steady flow of people in and out of the city ensured a solid base of people to be reached out to, while active commerce and trading meant that Paul could support himself through tent making.

Corinth

Although the Romans destroyed the city in 146 BC, Julius Caesar rebuilt Corinth as a Roman colony in 44 B.C., and the city quickly regained its commercial importance. In 27 BC, Augustus made Corinth the provincial capital of Achaia, adding political prominence to the city's unquestioned commercial importance.

Corinth was situated on the isthmus joining the northern and southern parts of Achaia. With a harbor on both sides, the isthmus served as the channel between Asia and Italy. They also built a large land road called the 'diolkos' which facilitated the transport of cargo and people across the isthmus. Small ships could also be towed on this road which would spare them the two hundred mile journey round the Cape of Malea. The city proper lay some three and a half kilometers inland, on a rocky hill. Today the ruins of temples, arched shops, paved streets, beautiful water-courses and swimming baths stand as archaeological evidence of the greatness and beauty of this metropolis. In Paul's day, Corinth was probably the wealthiest city in Greece.

Besides commerce, Corinth attracted pilgrims every two years to the Isthmian Games, one of the four major PanHellenic Games. The Isthmian Games honored Poseidon, god of the sea, and were held at nearby Isthmia. These pilgrims contributed to the rich cosmopolitan population of Romans, Greeks, and a sizeable Jewish community.

The city of Corinth also had a well-known reputation for immorality. The colloquial expression "to Corinthianize" meant to engage in immoral behavior and loose living. Thus it is no surprise that Paul warned his Corinthian converts against returning to the immorality and licentiousness out of which they came (1 Cor. 6:9–11; 2 Cor. 12:21). Extra biblical sources attest to the presence of a temple to Aphrodite which was said to employ a thousand prostitutes. Again it should come as no surprise that such immorality was one of the issues which Paul had to deal with in his letters to the Corinthians.

Ephesus

Ephesus was the capital city of the wealthy province of Asia. This proud city, boasted of her fame as the "Warden" of the great temple of Artemis, an ancient fertility/mother goddess worshiped by the Romans as Diana. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Artemision was the largest marble temple of the Greek world (about 420 × 240 feet). In Paul's day pilgrims from all over Asia Minor and beyond converged on Ephesus annually to pay homage to the goddess.

The city itself was situated where the Caÿster River emptied into the Mediterranean. Its location provided a well-protected harbor which afforded good anchorage despite the continual problem of silting. This in turn enabled it to serve as both a great export centre at the end of the Asiatic caravan-route and also as a natural landing-point from Rome. In addition to this, links with the Meander and Hermus Valleys afforded access to the agricultural wealth and interior cities of western Asia Minor.

Ephesus' economic and political importance can be further inferred by the Domitian's award (AD82) of a provincial imperial temple dedicated to the Flavian Dynasty. As a "temple warden" of a provincial imperial temple, Ephesus received political and commercial benefits and increased status among the cities of Asia.

Besides Ephesus' Political and Economic importance, Ephesus also played an important role in the evangelization of Asia Minor. It is very likely that Paul evangelized the interior by sending his disciples from Ephesus: Christianity evidently spread to Colossae and the other cities of the Lycus valley at the period of Paul's stay in Ephesus (cf. Col. 1:6–7; 2:1). In addition, Ephesus was Paul's headquarters for much of the Corinthian controversy (1 Cor 16:8), and could also have been the place from which he corresponded with the churches (the Corinthian correspondence; perhaps the Prison Epistles—Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon—according to some scholars).

Group Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the course of Paul's missionary Journey, we saw the hand of God preparing the ground, calling and directing people, and equipping, empowering and encouraging Paul. Take a moment to share about how God has worked or is currently working in your life.

2. Two interesting people feature in the life of Paul: Barnabas, who helped to mentor and nurture Paul as a young believer, and Timothy, whom Paul nurtures into a leader. Share with your group about way someone may have invested in your life, or ways in which you are (or hope to) investing in the lives of the next generation.

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Leader's Note:

All of us have had various people deposit things into our lives. Some may have had well identified mentors who have walked with them over many years. Others may have had a collection of many individuals who deposited in smaller but significant ways. It is always good to take time to remember and be grateful for the way God has worked in our own lives.

Similarly, all of us have people in and around our lives who can benefit from our input. Just as we have received blessing from others, so we can also look to bless the next generation, walking alongside them and teaching them from the wealth of not just our knowledge, but our life experiences. Some examples of this include:

- Older married couples who walk with younger married couples.
- Parents with older children teaching new parents how to cope with parenthood.
- Those with longer working experience may encourage those who just started working.
- Those who have graduated helping existing students in coping with their education.
- More experienced Christians who facilitate a cell group or teach bible studies

Appendix A – Love, Truth, and a Clear Conscience

The area of what is permissible and what is not permissible within the context of the Christian faith has always been a question which is difficult to answer. It is difficult because there is no answer which fits all situations.

Some examples of questions that may be asked include:

- 1) Can we eating food offered to idols? Should we eat such food in front of pre-believers?
- 2) What are the acceptable practices at non-Christian funerals (especially with regards to the family and their view)?

In order to answer these questions, we need to recognize that the issues at stake are not purely our religious ethics. The answers to these questions become greatly simplified if we remove the relational component introduced by the presence of other people. Indeed the complication arises because it is also a relational issue. As such, we need to tackle this issue from a perspective of what is right (truth), but also from a relational perspective.

PRINCIPLE 1 – Love God and Love Others

Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

There is no other commandment greater than these." – Mark 12:29-31

The first and most important principle is hinged on our relationship with God. Anything that negatively impacts our relationship with God must in the first instance be treated with some measure of suspicion and caution. Thus while the consumption of food offered to idols is debatable, the participation in any rites which are acts of worship to idols or ancestors is not acceptable by Christian standards. Christians must continually do those things which affirm our relationship with God, and avoid those things which tear down our relationship with God.

Similarly, Christians are called to love others. The only command which supersedes this is our call to love God. Where our actions do not manifestly impinge on our relationship with God, then we need to consider how we may best demonstrate love for others.

"Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." – Phil 2:3-4

One of the clearest demonstrations of love for the Christian comes in the form of humility. Jesus humbled himself when he came as a man and died for us. As Christians we are called to act similarly, where necessary, laying down our "rights" and preferring the needs of others. The goal of such actions would be not only to avoid stumbling another person, but to try and build them up as well. 1 Cor 10:23-24 says:

"All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up.

Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

PRINCIPLE 2 – Truth: Understanding what’s at stake

With many issues of this nature, the issues may consist of a blend of religious, cultural, and traditional roots. If we are to do justice to the issues, then effort must be taken to study and understand what’s at stake. As we study these, we may find that there are some issues which we can accept while there are others which we should reject.

For example, at Chinese funerals a piece of red string is often provided for those who come to visit. This string is provided because of the belief that bad luck will cling to those who visit, and so some red string (believed to bring good luck) is provided to counter the bad luck. Should Christian funerals continue to provide this string? Would that be propagating a false belief? Or would our failure to provide such a string show our insensitivity to cultural norms? What remains clear is that the Christian should not take and tie the string. Such an act declares his belief in “bad luck”, and denies the sovereignty of God in his life.

As with the example above, it is quite a fine line which divides, and depending on our understanding of what is acceptable, we may choose one or another course of action.

PRINCIPLE 3 – A Clear Conscience before God

Even after understanding the issue at stake, and even if we are acting in love (with the best of intentions), we need to recognize that our actions are subject to the interpretation of others. My humble act of love in choosing not to eat food offered to idols, could be easily construed by non-Christians as religious fanaticism, or the unwillingness to give “face” to the host. Conversely, my choice to eat such food (even after sufficiently explaining ones stand) may be seen by other Christian’s as compromising one’s faith; perhaps this why Paul often appeals in his letters to the need for us to have a clear conscience before God and Man.

“So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.” - Act 24:16

“The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” – 1 Tim 1:5

While we cannot determine how our actions before people are interpreted, we can determine that we have a clear conscience before God and Man in everything that we do. Again, this does not mean that everything we do with a clear conscience is correct; only that we did it with the right intentions.

Principle 4 – Communicate and Clarify

Nobody is perfect. We make mistakes in the actions that we take, and we make mistakes in the judgements that we make. Love, Truth and a Clear Conscience are some safeguards in helping us to act wisely. But where these fail, then take time to talk and understand each other; discover why you disagree with each other. And where the issue is not fundamental, we can agree to disagree, maintaining the unity of the body of Christ.