

The Acts of the Apostles – a daily Bible guide

Week Four

Week 4 Optional Family Activities

At home:

- **With younger kids:** In Acts 16, Paul and Silas meet a Greek business woman named Lydia who sells expensive purple cloth and who offers her home as a meeting place. When Lydia believes in Jesus and the new life God wants to give her, she invites other Christians to stay in her home, helps lead a church in Philippi, and gives Paul and Silas a place to stay when they get out of prison. As a family, talk about the blessings God has given you (a house, food, money, clothing, friends, toys, etc). What people do you know that your family can help this week? What needs do they have (money, friends, food, toys) that your family might help them with during Lent?
- **With older kids:** If you are creating a map, this week's journeys of Paul and others are an exciting route to follow! Continue noting key figures and events on your map as the church grows and diversifies.
- **Conversation topics with older kids might include:** Discuss the difference between seeking spirits who are unknown and manipulative (such as the slave master who is getting rich off his fortune telling slave in Acts 16) and God's Holy Spirit who 'gives life and breath to everything and satisfies every need' (Acts 17:25). Kids may have examples to share from movies or literature (think Harry Potter and Tolkien) that explore the various motives different characters have for using magic and the various sources of their magic. Do they use their magic for the good of others? Do they use magic to gain power over others? Do they get their magic by manipulating others?

Monday, March 11th

Acts 15:1-35

¹While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the Christians : "Unless you keep the ancient Jewish custom of circumcision taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." ²Paul and Barnabas, disagreeing with them, argued forcefully and at length. Finally, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. ³The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them--much to everyone's joy--that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.

⁴When they arrived in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported on what God had been doing through their ministry. ⁵But then some of the men who had been Pharisees before their conversion stood up and declared that all Gentile converts must be circumcised and be required to follow the law of Moses.

⁶So the apostles and church elders got together to decide this question. ⁷At the meeting, after a long

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discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: "Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. ⁸God, who knows people's hearts, confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he gave him to us. ⁹He made no distinction between us and them, for he also cleansed their hearts through faith. ¹⁰Why are you now questioning God's way by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? ¹¹We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the special favor of the Lord Jesus."

¹²There was no further discussion, and everyone listened as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

¹³When they had finished, James stood and said, "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. ¹⁵And this conversion of Gentiles agrees with what the prophets predicted. For instance, it is written:

¹⁶

Afterward I will return,
and I will restore the fallen kingdom of David.
From the ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will restore it,

¹⁷

so that the rest of humanity might find the Lord,
including the Gentiles--
all those I have called to be mine.

This is what the Lord says,

¹⁸

he who made these things known long ago.'

¹⁹And so my judgment is that we should stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰except that we should write to them and tell them to abstain from eating meat sacrificed to idols, from sexual immorality, and from consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals. ²¹For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations."

²²Then the apostles and elders and the whole church in Jerusalem chose delegates, and they sent them to Antioch of Syria with Paul and Barnabas to report on this decision. The men chosen were two of the church leaders--Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas. ²³This is the letter they took along with them:

"This letter is from the apostles and elders, your brothers in Jerusalem. It is written to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings!

²⁴"We understand that some men from here have troubled you and upset you with their teaching, but they had no such instructions from us. ²⁵So it seemed good to us, having unanimously agreed on our decision, to send you these official representatives, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷So we are sending Judas and Silas to tell you what we have decided concerning your question.

²⁸"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these requirements: ²⁹You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell."

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³⁰The four messengers went at once to Antioch, where they called a general meeting of the Christians and delivered the letter. ³¹And there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message.

³²Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke extensively to the Christians, encouraging and strengthening their faith. ³³They stayed for a while, and then Judas and Silas were sent back to Jerusalem, with the blessings of the Christians, to those who had sent them. ³⁵Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch to assist many others who were teaching and preaching the word of the Lord there.

Points of Interest:

- ‘Unless you keep the ancient Jewish custom of circumcision taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’—Jewish followers of Jesus are so upset that Paul and Barnabas have not required their non-Jewish listeners to convert to Judaism that they follow Paul and Barnabas around to all the new churches, correcting what they considered to be Paul and Barnabas’ mistake.
- ‘Paul and Barnabas, disagreeing with them, argued forcefully and at length.’—Paul fights tooth and nail for his view on this. He knows that the whole mission to the wider world is at stake. To require everyone to follow Jewish law would mean to force them to reject their own culture. Remember that earlier on in the story, Peter couldn’t even imagine eating with non-Jews. So, for these new believers in almost entirely non-Jewish settings, to convert to Judaism would mean to cut themselves off from pretty much everyone they know and from society in general. Paul knows that this would bring an end to the spread of Jesus’ good news outside of the Jewish culture. Few people would take such a deal (as the experience of the God-fearers before they heard of Jesus clearly shows), and those who did would quickly become a small and isolated sub-culture.
- ‘They reported on what God had been doing through their ministry’—rather than jump into theological debate they start by reporting the work of God. They seem to be saying something like, “Look and see what God is doing through us. God doesn’t seem to have a problem with our theology.”
- ‘So the apostles and church elders got together to decide this question’—known as the council of Jerusalem, this meeting held huge consequences for the whole history of Christianity. It’s clear that the leaders of the early church understand the weight of this meeting from the fact that this is the first reported gathering of all the leadership since Pentecost. Many of the apostles had left Jerusalem to plant churches in other areas, but for this meeting they have all reconvened.
- ‘God, who knows people’s hearts, confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he gave him to us.’—Peter’s experience with Cornelius years before, not Paul’s more recent experience, is the turning point in the debate. Peter has more seniority than Paul; since he’s one of the original twelve apostles, he can speak authoritatively about what they’ve always believed. Even more importantly, I imagine that the proponents of Gentile conversion to Judaism would assume that Peter is on their side. In one of his letters,

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Paul describes Peter as ‘apostle to the Jews’ (Galatians 2:8). But even ‘their’ apostle disagrees with the pro-Gentile-conversion contingent here. All of the apostles agree that you don’t need to be a Jew to follow Jesus.

- ‘We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the special favor of the Lord Jesus.’— Peter reminds the Jewish believers that the good things they’ve experienced don’t come from their religious upbringing but from God’s grace through Jesus. Peter addresses the dangerous tendency to confuse these. This temptation to ethnocentrism has been prevalent in every culture and church throughout history. Let’s watch out for it!
- ‘Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself’—James is the person who has taken over the direct leadership of the church in Jerusalem, as the original twelve apostles have moved on to other duties. Even he, the leader of the church in the center of Judaism, chimes in on Paul’s side. James sees God doing with the Gentiles what God once did with the Jewish people: making a new people to be in special relationship with God. James says it is God’s choosing a people that will determine their status as God’s people, not conversion to a culture. James then goes on to quote a Jewish prophet, Amos, to seal the deal and prove the point that God has chosen Gentiles as God’s people along with the Jews.
- ‘tell them to abstain from eating meat sacrificed to idols’—James is leading this group of powerful leaders because he knows how to work an effective compromise. Even though theologically Paul and Peter’s position is incontrovertible, there are ways to soften the blow for the pro-Jewish conversion party. This list of things for non-Jews to follow are some of the rules that are most offensive to Jewish believers and are probably overall unhelpful practices. Even these are not being laid down as strict requirements for being followers of Jesus. As we see later Paul is willing to bend on most of these except sexual immorality.
- ‘And there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message.’—I imagine that the non-Jewish believers are quite relieved to hear that the rules are not being suddenly and dramatically changed on them. They can continue to follow Jesus as they have been.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* There are probably things that bug you about people you know, even people with whom you are mostly on the same page in terms of faith. There are probably things that bug you about our church. Paul was really bugged by a group of people who saw things differently from him. He had a huge following and lots of clout, and he very well could have just split off from the more Jewish church and done his own thing. Instead, Paul takes time and energy to work things out with others. In the end he isn’t even the one to speak the conclusive words. He trusts the other leaders and their relationship to God. At the same time he doesn’t back off from what he considers the truth. Think about some of the things that bug you about your friends or

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about our church and lift them up to God. Ask God to give you peace. Ask for practical and loving ways to work out your differences with others.

- *Through your six:* People less familiar with religion often have fewer cultural hang-ups when it comes to following Jesus. They are a big gift to those of us who have been following Jesus for a longer time because they remind us of what is essential. Peter reminds the Jewish believers that they are only saved by Jesus' favor, not by being part of the right religious group. Particularly if you have a more religious background, pray that God would use your six to help you see Jesus with fresh eyes.
- *Through our church:* Doctrines, culture, and leadership differences: there are many things that can divide churches. Pray that our church would grow in being a church that deals with problems honestly, lovingly, and with every attempt to listen to God in the process.

Tuesday, March 12th

Acts 15:36-16:10

³⁶After some time Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's return to each city where we previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are getting along." ³⁷Barnabas agreed and wanted to take along John Mark. ³⁸But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not shared in their work. ³⁹Their disagreement over this was so sharp that they separated. Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed for Cyprus. ⁴⁰Paul chose Silas, and the believers sent them off, entrusting them to the Lord's grace. ⁴¹So they traveled throughout Syria and Cilicia to strengthen the churches there.

¹Paul and Silas went first to Derbe and then on to Lystra. There they met Timothy, a young disciple whose mother was a Jewish believer, but whose father was a Greek. ²Timothy was well thought of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium, ³so Paul wanted him to join them on their journey. In deference to the Jews of the area, he arranged for Timothy to be circumcised before they left, for everyone knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴Then they went from town to town, explaining the decision regarding the commandments that were to be obeyed, as decided by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. ⁵So the churches were strengthened in their faith and grew daily in numbers.

⁶Next Paul and Silas traveled through the area of Phrygia and Galatia, because the Holy Spirit had told them not to go into the province of Asia at that time. ⁷Then coming to the borders of Mysia, they headed for the province of Bithynia, but again the Spirit of Jesus did not let them go. ⁸So instead, they went on through Mysia to the city of Troas.

⁹That night Paul had a vision. He saw a man from Macedonia in northern Greece, pleading with him, "Come over here and help us." ¹⁰So we decided to leave for Macedonia at once, for we could only conclude that God was calling us to preach the Good News there.

Points of Interest:

- 'But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia'—Paul and Barnabas part company over Barnabas' decision to take his cousin John Mark with them. It's a pity to see such a strong act as Paul and Barnabas split up, but the long-term results for

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everyone seem to turn out quite good. John Mark goes on to write the Bible's book of Mark, most likely under Peter's guidance. Later on, Paul and John Mark themselves later reunite. In a later letter to Timothy, Paul asks him to bring Mark along; so either Mark changed, Paul did, or the nature of the later job suited the two of them working together better. Currently, in the absence of John Mark and more significantly Barnabas, Paul ends up choosing a new mission partner, Silas, who in yesterday's passage was one of the delegates the Jerusalem church sent to deliver the council's decision to Antioch and the other non-Jewish churches. I imagine having a sympathetic partner from the very heart of Jewishness with him would help Paul immensely in answering any remaining confusion caused by the proponents of Gentile conversion to Judaism.

- 'he arranged for Timothy to be circumcised'—this seems odd given Paul's recent fight to make circumcision unnecessary for non-Jews to be followers of Jesus. His reasoning isn't theological but pragmatic. As we know Paul always begins his ministry in the Jewish quarters of any town he visits. Given Timothy's half-Jewish identity Paul's reasoning seems to be that once circumcised Timothy would, like him, be able to easily minister to both Jews and non-Jews. This is again an example of contextualization, of making self-conscious decisions to more easily bring the gift of Jesus to all people groups. In the previous passage, Paul is mostly concerned with contextualization to non-Jews. Here he shows that he's also concerned to make it as easy as possible for Jews to hear about Jesus.
- 'the churches were strengthened in their faith and grew daily in numbers.'—Paul's job is to encourage churches to keep growing and planting new churches. The constant growth of the churches under his care seem to be a big reason we hear so much about Paul in the New Testament. Paul is very effectively serving as Jesus' witness himself, and calling others into the task of making sure that Jesus' story gets told to the very ends of the earth.
- 'again the Spirit of Jesus did not let them go'—the process of hearing God's voice for direction in our lives is not always straightforward, and we can make mistakes. Here we witness a series of misfires at hearing God's voice by Paul, the greatest church-planter who ever lived. His original plan, which we can assume was carefully prayed through, changes several times.
- 'we could only conclude that God was calling us to preach the Good News there.'—Paul finally gets a vision from God telling them to go to Greece. This is a big change of plans, arrived at only through a process of trial and error, hearing from God, and discussing together what they're hearing and experiencing.
- 'we could only conclude'—it's notable that so far the narrative in Acts has been in the third person plural 'they' and it changes here to 'we.' Apparently, Luke has joined the team.

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Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Paul's example of making mistakes as he tries to hear God's voice is an encouraging one for us. It also gives us a good model for learning to listen to God: listen, hold it lightly, talk with others, try it out, and listen again. Try this model out as you seek God's guidance during this Leap of Faith.
- *Through your six:* Paul invites several new people to join him in his work: Silas, Timothy and probably Luke. His invitation to join him powerfully changes each of their lives. What are things you can invite your six to do with you? These things don't need to be super-churchy, maybe it's exchanging help with house projects or joining you in your book club or . . . As you spend time together, look out for the ways that you or they are getting in touch with how your lives could be used for God's good purposes for the world.
- *Through our church:* Going to areas that have not yet experienced Jesus' goodness is one of the dreams of our church. In Paul's case this involved going from the Middle East to Europe. In our case we feel God has called our church to contribute to efforts to effectively bring blessing from Jesus back to the Middle East. Pray for lovers of Jesus who are in the Arab Middle East that they would love their Arab neighbors well in Jesus' name. Consider also asking God what part he would have you play in this endeavor, whether by actively supporting our friends who are in the Middle East, by joining them, or by loving a Muslim neighbor here in our area.

Wednesday, March 13th

Acts 16:11-24

¹¹We boarded a boat at Troas and sailed straight across to the island of Samothrace, and the next day we landed at Neapolis. ¹²From there we reached Philippi, a major city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony; we stayed there several days.

¹³On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we supposed that some people met for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had come together. ¹⁴One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying. ¹⁵She was baptized along with other members of her household, and she asked us to be her guests. "If you agree that I am faithful to the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my home." And she urged us until we did.

¹⁶One day as we were going down to the place of prayer, we met a demon-possessed slave girl. She was a fortune-teller who earned a lot of money for her masters. ¹⁷She followed along behind us shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved."

¹⁸This went on day after day until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and spoke to the demon within her. "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her," he said. And instantly it left her.

¹⁹Her masters' hopes of wealth were now shattered, so they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities at the marketplace. ²⁰"The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews!" they shouted. ²¹"They are teaching the people to do things that are against Roman customs."

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²²A mob quickly formed against Paul and Silas, and the city officials ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden rods. ²³They were severely beaten, and then they were thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to make sure they didn't escape. ²⁴So he took no chances but put them into the inner dungeon and clamped their feet in the stocks.

Points of Interest:

- 'If you agree that I am faithful to the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my home"'—Jesus had commanded his disciples to look for receptive people and to stay in one person's home when in a new town rather than move around. Here we see Paul using this strategy. The fact that Luke gives us more details about Lydia leads us to believe that she will play a key role in establishing the new church movement in Philippi. Her influence is already seen from the fact that her whole household is baptized.
- 'we met a demon-possessed slave girl. She was a fortune-teller who earned a lot of money for her masters.'—though many of us in the West are tempted to discount things like fortune tellers as myths or superstitions or charlatans, this is not how much of the world sees reality now nor how Paul viewed it then. The fact that this slave girl earns her masters lots of money indicates that she's pretty good at what she does. Earlier we saw the Holy Spirit give people the ability to prophesy. Maybe here we are seeing another, malevolent spirit giving the same ability.
- 'Paul got so exasperated that he turned and spoke to the demon within her.'—The fact that the demon is speaking the truth doesn't mean it's helpful. Apparently this demon is doing what it can to use Paul's popularity to keep up its own audience and influence.
- 'Her masters' hopes of wealth were now shattered'—more evidence that this girl is truly connected to a powerful demonic spirit. She can't simply be replaced by a good actor.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Lydia offers what she has: her large home. By that simple offer she becomes a key player in the early growth of the Philippian church. What can you offer right now? Your time, money, and personal possessions are all things you can offer to God's work in some way whether that's volunteering in one of the church's neighborhood programs through Vineyard Community Offerings, helping out on one of our Sunday teams, or helping host a small group. Ask God to show you how to concretely share what you have for God's purposes.
- *Through your six:* One phrase we sometimes use to describe our neck of the woods is 'grimly driven.' I wonder if that grim drivenness is due to the influence of a spirit out to do our whole area harm, rather like the evil spirit who kept Philippi under its thumb through the slave girl's prophecies. Either way, it can't hurt to pray that your six would be free from 'grim drivenness' and able to pursue all the best that God has for them.
- *Through our church:* It seems like often the attraction of a fortune-teller derives from fear that our lives will turn out badly; we need to know so desperately how things turn out because we're

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afraid they'll turn out badly. Our church hopes to be a place that inspires people to trust Jesus for lives that are impossibly great. Pray that we could resist the temptation to fear the worst, instead trusting Jesus more and more every day to give us the best lives without our need to control the outcome.

Thursday, March 14th

Acts 16:25-40

²⁵Around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. ²⁶Suddenly, there was a great earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! ²⁷The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. ²⁸But Paul shouted to him, "Don't do it! We are all here!"

²⁹Trembling with fear, the jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰He brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹They replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with your entire household."

³²Then they shared the word of the Lord with him and all who lived in his household. ³³That same hour the jailer washed their wounds, and he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized.

³⁴Then he brought them into his house and set a meal before them. He and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God.

³⁵The next morning the city officials sent the police to tell the jailer, "Let those men go!" ³⁶So the jailer told Paul, "You and Silas are free to leave. Go in peace."

³⁷But Paul replied, "They have publicly beaten us without trial and jailed us--and we are Roman citizens. So now they want us to leave secretly? Certainly not! Let them come themselves to release us!"

³⁸When the police made their report, the city officials were alarmed to learn that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. ³⁹They came to the jail and apologized to them. Then they brought them out and begged them to leave the city. ⁴⁰Paul and Silas then returned to the home of Lydia, where they met with the believers and encouraged them once more before leaving town.

Points of Interest:

- 'Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God'—I think Paul and Silas have every reason to complain, but instead they choose to praise God. And that praise not only unlocks their chains but also changes the lives of an entire jail--guard included--for the better. It's hard to overstate the power of praising God in all circumstances.
- 'Trembling with fear, the jailer called for lights'—at first, the jailer is afraid of what the authorities will do to him for letting the prisoners escape. Then, he's even more afraid of whoever it is who can seemingly cause an earthquake at will. When he sees that Paul and Silas mean him no harm, but in fact have good news for him, his fear quickly changes to relief, joy, and faith.
- 'Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with your entire household.'—as in Lydia's case the jailer's whole household follow his decision to believe in Jesus. I think it's

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easy to think of faith as an individualistic thing. But we affect one another more than we think. What happens to this jailer has an impact on his family and friends too.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* What has been getting you down lately? Often we are tempted to believe that God or life will always give us second best. Praise is a great antidote to self-pity. It reminds us, deep down to the core, that God is not just theoretically good, but actually good to us personally. Practice praising God today for the good things--and even in the hard things--in your life.
- *Through your six:* Pray that your six would have earth-shattering experiences of God's goodness toward them, just like the Philippian jailer.
- *Through our church:* At the end of this passage, Paul and Silas hand off responsibility for this still rather new work of God to the Philippians, give them a hearty encouragement, and move on. Pray for good transfers of leadership in our church. Pray for successful hand-offs, filled with an abundance of cheerful encouragement.

Friday, March 15th

Acts 17:1-15

¹Now Paul and Silas traveled through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ²As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row he interpreted the Scriptures to the people. ³He was explaining and proving the prophecies about the sufferings of the Messiah and his rising from the dead. He said, "This Jesus I'm telling you about is the Messiah." ⁴Some who listened were persuaded and became converts, including a large number of godly Greek men and also many important women of the city.

⁵But the Jewish leaders were jealous, so they gathered some worthless fellows from the streets to form a mob and start a riot. They attacked the home of Jason, searching for Paul and Silas so they could drag them out to the crowd. ⁶Not finding them there, they dragged out Jason and some of the other believers instead and took them before the city council. "Paul and Silas have turned the rest of the world upside down, and now they are here disturbing our city," they shouted. ⁷"And Jason has let them into his home. They are all guilty of treason against Caesar, for they profess allegiance to another king, Jesus."

⁸The people of the city, as well as the city officials, were thrown into turmoil by these reports. ⁹But the officials released Jason and the other believers after they had posted bail.

¹⁰That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea. When they arrived there, they went to the synagogue. ¹¹And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth. ¹²As a result, many Jews believed, as did some of the prominent Greek women and many men.

¹³But when some Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God in Berea, they went there and stirred up trouble. ¹⁴The believers acted at once, sending Paul on to the coast, while Silas

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and Timothy remained behind. ¹⁵Those escorting Paul went with him to Athens; then they returned to Berea with a message for Silas and Timothy to hurry and join him.

Points of Interest:

- ‘Paul and Silas traveled through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue’—once again, Paul makes a beeline for a synagogue, where he has so often found a receptive audience, particularly among God-fearing non-Jews.
- ‘including a large number of godly Greek men and also many important women of the city’-- once again Paul’s strategy hits paydirt. There are indeed a bunch of God-fearers eager to hear what he has to say.
- ‘They are all guilty of treason against Caesar’—of course, just as often as Paul finds an eager audience of God-fearers, he also finds a hostile audience of synagogue leaders who are uninterested in his message and jealous of his sudden influence.
- ‘That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea.’—Paul and Silas seem to be getting better at avoiding jail. Paul and Silas rejoiced and praised God when they were imprisoned in Philippi, but that doesn’t mean that they’re interested in running headlong into trouble the next time around.
- ‘They searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth’—the Bereans were Jews and God-fearers who know a lot about the Jewish Scriptures already. Their interaction with Paul and Silas around the scripture seems to come from a genuine openness and desire for truth rather than cynical questioning. They’re humble and hard-working in trying to really understand what the Bible is saying to them. I hope the same can be said about me.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Over time, Paul began to get a feel for who was interested in hearing more about what he had to say about Jesus and who was not; and perhaps not surprisingly he increasingly began to focus more of his attention on people who were truly interested. Think about the people in your life. Are there people who, if you’re honest, have probably had their fill of talking about spiritual things with you? How about people who may, in fact, want to hear more? What would it take and what would it mean for you to let that first group go, and to have more spiritual discussions with the second group?
- *Through your six:* Pray that God would give your six curiosity and humility as they approach their questions of faith, just like the Bereans had in this passage. Pray that it would bring a new vibrancy to their entire life.
- *Through our church:* In many ways the synagogues were centers of learning in their cities and attracted people interested in the search for truth. Pray for the many institutions of learning in

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our city. Pray that people at those institutions would find the truth and meaning they are looking for.

Saturday, March 16th

Acts 17:16-34

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. ¹⁷He went to the synagogue to debate with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.

¹⁸He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, "This babbler has picked up some strange ideas." Others said, "He's pushing some foreign religion."

¹⁹Then they took him to the Council of Philosophers. "Come and tell us more about this new religion," they said. ²⁰"You are saying some rather startling things, and we want to know what it's all about." ²¹(It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.)

²²So Paul, standing before the Council, addressed them as follows: "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious, ²³for as I was walking along I saw your many altars. And one of them had this inscription on it--'To an Unknown God.' You have been worshiping him without knowing who he is, and now I wish to tell you about him.

²⁴"He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, ²⁵and human hands can't serve his needs--for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need there is. ²⁶From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand which should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

²⁷"His purpose in all of this was that the nations should seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him--though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸For in him we live and move and exist. As one of your own poets says, 'We are his offspring.' ²⁹And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone. ³⁰God overlooked people's former ignorance about these things, but now he commands everyone everywhere to turn away from idols and turn to him. ³¹For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead."

³²When they heard Paul speak of the resurrection of a person who had been dead, some laughed, but others said, "We want to hear more about this later." ³³That ended Paul's discussion with them, ³⁴but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the Council, a woman named Damaris, and others.

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Points of Interest:

- ‘he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city’--in his many travels in non-Jewish areas, Paul is no stranger to the idea that people would worship idols. But Athens remains eye-popping. The Athenians have an overwhelming number of spiritual options, and yet for some reason none of it seems to truly be satisfying their spiritual desires.
- ‘He went to the synagogue to debate’—in every other account of Paul going to a synagogue there is a report of Jews and God-fearers believing in Jesus. Here the record is silent. Apparently, the spiritual atmosphere here is such that even where Paul might expect an eager audience he gets a tough crowd.
- ‘he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.’—Paul tries new approaches but to little avail. It’s also interesting to note that Paul often performs miracles to accompany his message, but here it seems to just be words.
- ‘we want to know what it's all about’—the council of philosophers initially appear interested in hearing about Jesus. As it turns out, their eagerness is for the most part not a particular interest in Jesus, but just a voraciousness for new ideas to discuss--and, in some cases, to mock.
- ‘When they heard Paul speak of the resurrection of a person who had been dead, some laughed’—talking abstract philosophy is one thing and talking about a God who acted miraculously in history is quite another. Paul is openly mocked and leaves with only a couple of converts. There is no talk of starting a church in Athens and we never hear Paul refer to any work of God here. Like Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth there seem to be some places where the timing is just not right.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Failure! No one likes this word but we all face it. Even the great apostle Paul faced failure. I’m sure Paul was disappointed to have his work flop in Athens, and that he didn’t enjoy being laughed at. But he didn’t try to force success. When he realizes that things just aren’t working out in Athens, he simply leaves. Sometimes the best thing we can do with failure is move on. Is there failure in your past you are still living in? What will it mean for you to just leave it behind.
- *Through your six:* Paul tells the Athenians, ‘we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.’ Something we make with our own hands can’t really give us what we want out of a relationship with God. Pray that your six would not go down the dead end of pinning their hopes on something that, in the end, is smaller than them.
- *Through our church:* Our church is made up of lots of smart people, as may be inevitable in a town with so many institutions of higher learning. You could say that Boston is the modern day equivalent to Athens. Soberingly, Athens is the least receptive place to Jesus that Paul has yet

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encountered. Pray that our smarts would not get in the way of our church being a place where people are seeking and finding a genuine relationship with a living God.

Sunday, March 17th

Acts 18:1-17

¹Then Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.² There he became acquainted with a Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently arrived from Italy with his wife, Priscilla. They had been expelled from Italy as a result of Claudius Caesar's order to deport all Jews from Rome. ³ Paul lived and worked with them, for they were tentmakers just as he was.

⁴Each Sabbath found Paul at the synagogue, trying to convince the Jews and Greeks alike. ⁵And after Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul spent his full time preaching and testifying to the Jews, telling them, "The Messiah you are looking for is Jesus." ⁶But when the Jews opposed him and insulted him, Paul shook the dust from his robe and said, "Your blood be upon your own heads--I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

⁷After that he stayed with Titius Justus, a Gentile who worshiped God and lived next door to the synagogue. ⁸Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, and all his household believed in the Lord. Many others in Corinth also became believers and were baptized.

⁹One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him, "Don't be afraid! Speak out! Don't be silent!

¹⁰For I am with you, and no one will harm you because many people here in this city belong to me." ¹¹So Paul stayed there for the next year and a half, teaching the word of God.

¹²But when Gallio became governor of Achaia, some Jews rose in concerted action against Paul and brought him before the governor for judgment. ¹³They accused Paul of "persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law." ¹⁴But just as Paul started to make his defense, Gallio turned to Paul's accusers and said, "Listen, you Jews, if this were a case involving some wrongdoing or a serious crime, I would be obliged to listen to you. ¹⁵But since it is merely a question of words and names and your Jewish laws, you take care of it. I refuse to judge such matters." ¹⁶And he drove them out of the courtroom. ¹⁷The mob had grabbed Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and had beaten him right there in the courtroom. But Gallio paid no attention.

Points of Interest:

- 'they were tentmakers just as he was.'—it's clear by now that Paul's main aim in life is to spread the word about the great life benefits available from Jesus. But apparently doing that doesn't totally pay the bills; so, Paul spends some time making tents on the side. Here, he finds new partners in his Jesus-work at the tent-making office.
- 'From now on I will go to the Gentiles'—just as in other cities, Paul goes to the synagogue and to his fellow Jews first. As always, he ends up moving on to also talk with interested non-Jews. But here the transition seems more swift and dramatic. He doesn't want to have anything to do with the synagogue anymore.

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- ‘Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, and all his household believed in the Lord.’—ironically, after Paul breaks his ties with this synagogue, the leader of it starts to follow Jesus.
- ‘One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him, "Don't be afraid!"’—you’d think that Paul would by now be used to being opposed, and even driven out of a city. But apparently he stills needs God’s comfort and encouragement to sign himself up for it again and again.
- ‘Gallio turned to Paul's accusers and said . . . I refuse to judge such matters’—these fierce religious tensions between two Jewish sects--as far as he sees it--don’t really matter to Gallio in the least. In fact, he doesn’t even understand what all of them are talking about. Matters of life and death to these Jews are just a bunch of gobbledy-gook to this Roman governor.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Paul has a day job making tents, and then teaches about Jesus at night. Paul definitely seems to care more about spreading Jesus’ good news than he does about tents; and yet we also see Jesus at work in both of Paul’s venues. How do your life passions and your job with a paycheck interact with one another? How do you see Jesus at work in either place?
- *Through your six:* Paul is quick to accept hospitality, partnership, and other help from the people around him. It builds his relationships with them, and draws them all closer to God. What are things that your six have to offer you that through accepting you might deepen your relationship with them?
- *Through our church:* There’s a big communication gap in this passage between the group of Jews and Gallio. Either these Jews are truly not focusing on something that’s at all significant to Gallio, or at the very least they’re not very effective at communicating why it is. Pray for our church, that we would not have the same problem. Pray that we would focus on what is important, and that we’d be able to communicate with others outside our community why it is, in fact, so important.