



Welcome to Bible Study for Term 3, 2022. In term 1 we studied the first seven chapters of Acts—the record of the explosive growth of the Word of God as the earliest followers of Jesus gave *witness* to what they'd seen and heard. This term we're going to hear how Jesus' mission continues and grows beyond the borders of Israel, to the world.

Through listening to Acts, we pray God will work in our hearts by his Spirit, empowering us to join in his mission to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus to 'the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

# 1. Witnessing to the Excluded

## Acts 8

Have you ever felt excluded from a group (for example, not picked for a sporting team)?

At the start of the year, we studied Acts 1-7. These were exciting, but daunting, days for the earliest followers of Jesus. The Spirit was poured out to empower them for mission and people were repenting and believing by their thousands. At the same time, persecution was growing and sin and selfishness threatened to destroy the church. But despite what appears to be the greatest threat yet—the lynching of Stephen—God’s Word prevails.

## Read Acts 8

What happens to the Jerusalem church because of the *great persecution*? If you were one of the earliest believers, how might you have felt?

Read Acts 1:8. What has Jesus commanded the apostles to do? How does this *great persecution* fit with Christ’s commission?

In Acts 6 seven men ‘full of the Spirit and wisdom’ are tasked with ensuring Hebrew-speaking and Greek-speaking widows get a fair share of the food provided by other Christians. Despite their job being ‘waiting on tables,’ in chapters 6 and 7 we see one of the seven, Stephen, speaking God’s Word boldly, even though it costs his life. His martyrdom<sup>1</sup> is the spark that ignites widespread persecution. But despite persecution, believers continue to witness to Jesus.

In Acts 8, it’s another of the seven, Philip, who comes onto centre stage. God’s mission continues through him (not the Apostles!), as he bears witness to Samaritans and a eunuch.

## ***Samaritans in God’s Kingdom***

Have a skim over John 4:1-26, paying particular attention to verses 9 and 19-24. How would you characterise the relationship between Jews and Samaritans? What does Jesus say the future of Jewish and Samaritan *worship* will look like?

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<sup>1</sup> *Martyr* is the Greek word that means *witness*. It didn’t originally have anything to do with dying for a cause—but just speaking the truth (of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension).

The Samaritans had been excluded from God's people. What happens when Philip brings the good news?

Why do you think the Holy Spirit isn't received until Peter and John come?

How does Simon show that, in Christ, those who were once excluded are now welcome in God's kingdom?

### ***A Eunuch in God's Kingdom***

Under the law of Moses (see Deuteronomy 23:1 and Leviticus 21:20-23) eunuchs<sup>2</sup> were excluded from serving as priests or even joining together with fellow Israelites in the assembly/church. The eunuch Philip met on the road to Gaza could be an ethnic Ethiopian (i.e. a Gentile) or ethnically Jewish (there was a large Jewish community in northern Africa). Either way, that he has been to Jerusalem (presumably to worship at the temple) and that he's reading the prophet Isaiah, suggest he's either a Jew or a convert to Judaism.

What questions does the eunuch ask Philip? What answer does Philip give?

How does the eunuch respond to the good news?

How does this eunuch show that, in Christ, those who were once excluded are now welcome in God's kingdom?

## **Reflection**

What are some things that can make you feel excluded or unworthy of God's kingdom? How does the welcoming of Samaritans (including Simon the sorcerer) and the Ethiopian eunuch give comfort and encouragement?

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<sup>2</sup> i.e. any male person with damaged testicles, due to birth, an accident, or deliberate castration.

How does Philip's example encourage you to 'proclaim the good news' to our region?



Source: New Bible Atlas (IVP)

## 2. Witness of a Murderer

Acts 9:1-31

Who do you think is the least likely person to become a Christian?

Luke has already introduced Saul to us. He was there when Stephen was killed (7:58, 8:1) and then actively persecuted the Jerusalem church (8:3). And now he plans to extend his murderous plans—though Jesus has another idea!

### Read Acts 9:1-19

What is Saul's purpose in going to Damascus? (Damascus was the capital of Syria - see map on the previous page.) And what happens to him on the way?

What does Jesus say to Saul? Is there anything he says you find surprising?

What does Jesus tell Ananias to do and what message is he to give Saul? How does Ananias respond? How does Saul respond?

Why do you think God used Ananias to speak to Saul?

### Read Acts 9:20-31

After his baptism and receiving his sight, what does Saul do? How do people (disciples and non-disciples) respond?

*The Jews in Damascus:*

*The disciples in Damascus:*

*The disciples in Jerusalem:*

*Barnabas:*

*The Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews in Jerusalem:*

What is the impact of Saul's conversion (verse 31)?

## Reflection

Read Galatians 1:15-16. In his later reflection, what does Saul (aka Paul) say is the ultimate reason for his conversion?

If God chose to save Saul and empower him for mission, how should this shape our prayers for those we think least likely to trust in Jesus?

# 3. Witnessing to the World

Acts 9:32-11:18

As we begin, spend time praying for opportunities to speak with those who are not currently believers.

## Read Acts 9:32-43

Whilst Philip has been proclaiming Christ to Samaritans and Ethiopian eunuchs and Saul has been persecuting and now is converted and proclaiming Christ—what has Peter been doing? What has been the result?

## Read Acts 10:1-8

Who is Cornelius and what is his relationship to God? What things make Cornelius an *outsider* to the kingdom of God? What makes him *near* to the kingdom?

## Read Acts 10:9-23

What does Peter see in his trance? What is significant about the animals on the menu (you might like to look at Leviticus 11)? How does *the voice* respond to Peter's objection?

When Cornelius' messengers arrive, what does the Holy Spirit tell Peter to do? How might this be related to the vision?

## Read Acts 10:24-48

When Peter arrives at Cornelius' house, what do we learn about his previous understanding of non-Jewish people? Why is Peter's understanding changed?

What does Peter tell Cornelius' household about Jesus? How is this the *good news of peace*?

How do Cornelius and all who heard respond to the good news? How does this show that God *shows no favouritism/partiality*?

## Read Acts 11:1-18

How do the Judean believers respond when they hear of Peter spending time with Gentiles?

After Peter retells what happened, how do they feel?

## Reflect

For many of us, as we read Acts 10-11 we put ourselves in Peter's and the Judean's shoes. We might want to reflect on how our churches implicitly (or, sadly, explicitly) exclude people for whom God has granted *repentance that leads to life*. Although this isn't a bad question to ask, for those of us who are not ethnically Jewish, we must begin by seeing ourselves in Cornelius' shoes.

Ephesians 2:11-12 (NIV) says,

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

What is the situation we Gentiles all faced before Christ?<sup>3</sup>

How does remembering this encourage us when we think about those who currently not believers?

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, on this side of the resurrection of Jesus, Jewish people who do not receive him as Lord and Christ are similarly 'without hope and without God'. If you want to reflect more on this, read Romans 9-11. You can also listen to some sermons on this part of Romans - <https://gympiepresbyterian.org.au/series/knowning-and-living-in-gods-mercy/>



# 4. Threats to Witness

Acts 11:19-12:25

## Read Acts 11:19-30

Acts 11:19 takes us back to Acts 8:4 when, following Stephen's murder, the Jerusalem church is scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Now we find believers as far north as Antioch (to the east of the Mediterranean in what is now southern Turkey), the island of Cyprus, and Paul has returned to Tarsus (also in modern-day Turkey, to the north of the Mediterranean).

In the light of Cornelius' conversion, what do you notice about the evangelism of the scattered believers? How do the believers in Jerusalem respond? Why do you think they do this?

When Barnabas comes to Antioch, what's his assessment of the church? What kind of ministry does Barnabas (with Saul) engage in during this time in Antioch?<sup>4</sup>

What does the response of the Christians in Antioch to news of impending famine tell us about relationships between churches? (You might want to compare with what's described in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37—where we first meet Barnabas.)

## Read Acts 12

This chapter returns the focus to Jerusalem. Along with the impending famine, what other problems does the church in Jerusalem face? How does the church respond?

The fate of Stephen and James shows God doesn't spare his people from unjust death. What does the rescue of Peter teach us about God?

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<sup>4</sup> There are two different cities named Antioch which play a significant role in Acts. In the ancient world there were 16 towns named Antioch—named after the father of a Greek general and king in the 3rd century BC. You might like to refer to the map on page 14 to see the two locations.

Herod comes to a graphic and grizzly end. What does the death of Herod teach us about God?

How is the fate of Herod contrasted with that of the Word of God? Why do you think people becoming followers of Jesus is described as the *Word of God* increasing?

In the prophet Obadiah, we hear God speak about a time when the Edomites (descendants of Esau) not only celebrated the destruction of Judah (probably at the hands of Babylon) but took advantage of the destruction by looting and pillaging what was left. In Obadiah verse 18, God promises “Esau will be stubble, and they will set him on fire and destroy him. There will be no survivors from Esau.” (You can listen to the sermon on Obadiah here: [https://gympiepresbyterian.org.au/series/obadiah/.](https://gympiepresbyterian.org.au/series/obadiah/))

What’s this got to do with Acts 12? King Herod was an Edomite. In his grizzly end we see God’s promise through Obadiah being fulfilled. As we heard in Acts 2, the *Last Days* have come and as Obadiah 15-18 says, in these days God’s people (now not only Israelites, but all who trust in Jesus) will receive God’s salvation, whilst the enemies of God—the Edomites—will be consumed.

## Reflection

Barnabas means ‘son of encouragement’ (see Acts 4:46). How is Barnabas’ encouragement of believers a model for us?

The Christians in Antioch responded practically to news of fellow believers in another part of the world suffering. Should we do the same? If so, how might we do this?

# 5. The Light of Witness

## Acts 13

After the increased persecution, which led to the miraculous release of Peter from prison and Herod's grizzly death, the historical record of Acts takes a turn. The Apostle Peter fades into the background (he's mentioned only one more time, in chapter 15) and the historical record now follows Saul (aka Paul) on his *missionary journeys*. As we read Acts 13, keep an ear out for similarities between Peter's and Saul's ministry.

There are lots of places mentioned in this chapter. You may find a map of Paul's missionary journeys (like the one on page 14 and many Bibles include these maps towards the back) useful for visualising where events occur.

### Read Acts 13:1-12

On the island of Cyprus (which was Barnabas' home—see Acts 4:36) how is the word of God received?

Some people think that after meeting Jesus, Saul changes his name to Paul—like how God changed Abram's name to Abraham or Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter. That's not the case for Saul. This change was for cultural reasons—in non-Jewish contexts Saul uses the more culturally appropriate name, Paul. (Paul is never called by his Jewish name again. This might have something to do with his particular mission given in Acts 9:15.)

Why is blindness appropriate for this Jewish false prophet? What does this miracle reveal about Paul?

### Read Acts 13:13-43

Paul and Barnabas now take the word of God into the province of Galatia (Paul would later write Galatians to the church that was established here). During their journey, John Mark leaves them and returns to Jerusalem, an incident that becomes significant in Acts 15.

In Antioch (this is a different city from verse 1), where do Paul and his companions go to proclaim Christ? Why do you think they go here?

Acts 13 contains one of Paul's longest speeches. Read the sermon (vv17-40) carefully, and note

- to whom Paul is speaking

- how he uses the Old Testament
- what events in Jesus' life are mentioned
- what response he calls for

## Read Acts 13:44-52

As Paul preaches the following Sabbath, how do some of the Jews respond? Why?

Paul and Barnabas respond to the opposition by quoting Isaiah 49:6. (If you have time) Read Isaiah 49:1-6. What does Isaiah say is God's plans for the Gentiles? How are Paul and Barnabas participating in the mission of the servant?

How do Paul, Barnabas, and the new Christians in Antioch respond to persecution?

## Reflection

How do the different responses to the word of God encourage us as we speak about Jesus to non-believers?

# 6. Witnessing to What God Has Done

## Acts 14

What or who encourages you to keep trusting in Jesus? What is it that makes it encouraging?

In Acts 14 we read the record of the end of Paul's first missionary journey.<sup>5</sup> As Paul and his companions journey through what is now Turkey, we see God at work through patterns of mission and ministry. In this study we'll consider how our life together should be shaped by the same kinds of patterns and priorities.

### Read Acts 14:1-19

Use the table below to compare what occurred in Iconium and Lystra (you might like to look at the map later to understand where Paul and his companions are travelling).

	Iconium	Lystra
<b>Where ministry was centred:</b>		
<b>What was said:</b>		
<b>What was done:</b>		
<b>How the people responded:</b>		

How is Paul's and Barnabas' message in Lystra different from what we heard in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-43)?

Despite the attention gained by miraculous healing, what evidence does Paul give to God's goodness in verses 16-17?

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<sup>5</sup> Although this is traditionally called the *first* missionary journey, Paul's actual first mission was to the cities of Damascus, Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Tarsus (Acts 9:20-31).

In Acts 13:46 Paul and Barnabas announce they're 'turning to the Gentiles'. In the context of the mission to Iconium and Lystra, how are we to understand this statement?

### Read Acts 14:20-28

On their journey back to Syrian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas return to churches they'd planted. What do they do when they visit these young churches? What does this teach us about how churches are to be led?



What does Paul teach these young churches? What expectations does this give for the Christian life? How might this be different from what they might have expected?

What report do they give when they return to Antioch?

## **Reflection**

What expectations have you been given of the Christian life? How is this the same or different from how Paul explains life in Christ to these young churches?

What did you notice about how these earliest churches were organised and led? Do you think this should shape the way churches are organised today?

# 7. Witnessing to Gospel Truth

Acts 15:1-35

Have you ever seen Christians disagree over doctrine? How have those disagreements been addressed?

## Read Acts 15:1-5

What do the group from Antioch do as they travel up to Jerusalem? How do churches respond to their report?

What question do the Judean and Pharisaical believers raise about Gentile Christians?<sup>6</sup>

## Read Acts 15:6-19

Who is called to help answer this question? What does this reveal about how early churches related to each other?

What does Peter say he has learnt about God's choice to save Gentiles?

(As an aside, how does Peter show his understanding of the triunity of God?)

How does James<sup>7</sup> show the salvation of Gentiles is from God?

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<sup>6</sup> We may be used to thinking about Pharisees as those who were opposed to Jesus. Here, those from the *party of the Pharisees* are believers in Jesus, though it seems they continue to emphasise the role of the law of Moses.

<sup>7</sup> The first mention of James is in Acts 12:17. This James is most likely one of Jesus' brothers who became a significant leader in the Jerusalem church. Most likely he's the same James who wrote the letter of James.



## Read Acts 15:20-35

What four things does James suggest Gentile believers should be advised to do? What reason does he give?

It's not immediately obvious why these four prohibitions are given to Gentile believers.

It could be these four prohibitions are based on Leviticus 17-18—which were parts of the law of Moses that were applied, not only to Israelites but to foreigners living in the promised land. Possibly James is asking Gentile believers, even those living beyond the province of Judea, to follow these laws in order to limit offending both believing and unbelieving Jews.

Alternatively, these four things were central to pagan temple worship. It could be that, similar to 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, these things are being prohibited to prevent offending the consciences of Christians by having even fleeting associations with idolatry.

How and to whom did the gathering in Jerusalem communicate their decision?

How did the Gentile-majority churches respond to the message from the Jerusalem gathering?

## Reflection

The 'Jerusalem Council' responds to the first significant doctrinal disagreement amongst Christians. What (if anything) does this event teach us how we should organise churches and deal with disagreements?

In his commentary on Acts, John Stott calls this a 'double victory—a victory of truth in confirming the gospel of grace, and a victory of love in preserving the fellowship.' Do you agree or disagree? How could we learn to live out the same values when we disagree with other Christians?

The initial question of what is required for people, especially Gentiles, to be saved. From how the apostles and elders in Jerusalem answered this question, what would you say a person must do to be saved?

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