

A hand holding a globe against a background of mountains. The globe is positioned on the right side of the frame, with a hand visible at the bottom right. The background shows a range of mountains under a cloudy sky. The text is overlaid on the left and center of the image.

→
**UNHINDERED
KINGDOM**

ACTS 15-28

Growth Groups
Term 1 2023

GYMPIE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Welcome to Growth Groups for 2023. Last year we studied Acts 1-15 which records the explosive growth of the Word of God. We saw God's Word crossing boundaries as not only Jews, but also Samaritans, and Gentiles believed the gospel with joy (e.g. Acts 13:48). In this series of studies we'll be seeing how the gospel spreads deeper into the Gentile (non-Jewish) world—to city philosophers and rural communities. There'll be times of gospel growth as well as significant opposition and difficulties. However, the growth of God's kingdom is never hindered.

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).

How to get the most out of Growth Groups

This year we're using a new name for our mid-week groups: *Growth Groups*. This is to remind us that our goal in meeting together is to *grow* in Christ—*grow* in our knowledge of God, our love for one another, and our passion and ability to reach our region with the gospel.

Central to Growth Groups is God's Word because God grows his people through his Word. God is also at work through one another, as we share our lives, encourage each other, and pray for each other.

So how can you get the most out of Growth Groups?

1. Be praying for your Growth Group. Pray for other members, pray for the group times, that God would be working to grow us in Christian maturity.
2. Read the Bible passage before the group meets. Some weeks we'll be reading quite a bit from Acts, so it may help to familiarise yourself with the general outline of the passage before the group meets.
3. Get into the discussion by asking questions. A key part of how we dig into God's Word together is through discussion—and asking questions is the best way to get the discussion going. That's why our study booklets are mainly questions...they're a tool to help us dig! And it's good to remember there are no silly or wrong questions—if it's something you're wondering about, someone else is probably wondering the same thing (or they'd love to work with you to find the answer).
4. Beware of study notes. Study Bibles are great resources—they have tools like maps, indexes, timelines, and diagrams that can really help summarise and illustrate parts of the Bible. But sometimes in study groups, study Bible notes can prevent us from digging into God's Word. They take the discussion away from looking closely at God's Word and away from engaging with and encouraging one another. They can be a good tool—but only if handled with care!
5. Share what God's doing in your life. Things that are encouraging and you want to thank God for, things that are concerning and you need supportive prayer.

If you've been part of a small group before, I'm sure you can think of other things too!

Credits

Maps and verse images are provided by Faithlife and the maps on pages 15 and 17 are © Mark Barry 2008 (visualunit.me).

Some of the questions were inspired by studies produced by Redlands Presbyterian Church in 2022 and *Teaching Acts* by David Cook (2007, Proclamation Trust).

1. Called to Preach

Acts 15:36-16:40

Setting the Scene

Passage	What does this tell us about the spread of the gospel?
Acts 1:8	
Acts 2:41-47	
Acts 6:7	
Acts 8:4-5, 14	
Acts 10:44-45	
Acts 15:30-31	

So far we've seen the gospel grow as Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles hear the gospel and believe. But the mission hasn't been easy—there's been persecution from outside and sin and false teaching inside. As we pick up Luke's historical record, we're going to see God continuing to be powerfully at work, through circumstances, to have his gospel go to the world.

Read Acts 15:36-41

What's Paul and Barnabas' plan?

How is the conflict solved and how do you think it's used for God's mission?

Read Acts 16:1-10

In the context of Acts 15:1-11, what do you think of Paul's actions in 16:3?

How do we see God being in control of his mission?

Read Acts 16:11-40

How do we see God in control of the mission in the conversion of Lydia?

You'd think being arrested and beaten isn't part of God's plan. In what ways do we see God at work through this?

How do we see the lives of Lydia, the enslaved girl, and the jailer impacted by the gospel? What might this tell us about the church that gathered in Lydia's house?

How do Paul and Silas respond to opposition?

...and all their household

When Lydia and the jailer are converted we read that not only are they saved and baptised, but so is their whole household (vv15, 31-34).

In the ancient world, the household was normally more than Dad, Mum, and the kids—it would often include extended family and servants/slaves. Although we aren't told the make-up of these households (and we need to be careful about making too much of things which aren't explicitly said in the Bible), household baptism fits with the practice of baptising believers and their children.

(If you want to think more about covenant/infant baptism, I recommend a new, short book—*Covenant Baptism* by Jason Helopoulos.)

Reflection

A few things happen in this section of Acts that could make Paul wonder if God was still at work—and yet he was. How can we similarly be encouraged throughout times of conflict or opposition?



There are many ways conflict can go bad—but conflict is inevitable. What do we learn from how Paul and Barnabas dealt with their disagreement?

2. Good News for the Wise

Acts 17

Does speaking about Jesus make you nervous? Are there situations that make you more nervous than others?

Read Acts 17:1-15

In Thessalonica, where does Paul go to proclaim the gospel? How is his preaching summarised?

How do the Thessalonians respond? Is their charge against Jason true? What does this charge say about how the gospel was proclaimed?

How is the gospel received in Berea? Why does Paul end up leaving?

Read Acts 17:16-21

What provokes Paul to speak of Jesus in Athens?

How is Paul's missionary strategy the same/different in Athens than in the previous two cities?

How does Luke portray the philosophers in Athens? Do you think this a positive or negative characterisation?



Read Acts 17:22-34

This is the most detailed summary of Paul's preaching since he spoke in the *synagogue* in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41).

What are the key truths Paul proclaims? (List them out.)

How is the method of this message different from what Paul said in Thessalonica? How is the content the same/different?

What response does Paul call for? And how do the philosophers respond?

Reflection

The Athenians thought themselves wise. From this chapter, who is actually wise? How does knowing this give confidence in speaking about Jesus?

Think about your friends, family, colleagues, and neighbours. How are they like the Thessalonians, Bereans, or Athenians? How might this shape the way we speak to them about Jesus?

To many of us, Paul seems all-competent, able to engage with all sorts of people and speak to them of Christ. How might we learn to speak of Jesus to the different kinds of people we meet?

3. The Good News of Jesus

Acts 18:1-19:10

How would you summarise the gospel of Jesus in one or two sentences?

Read Acts 18:1-23

...and fill out the following table

	In Corinth	In Ephesus
Where does Paul preach?		
How long does Paul stay?		
Who is with him?		
How did they partner together?		
How did people respond?		
What kind of opposition did the gospel face?		

Reflection

We see Paul partner with other believers. Why do we need gospel partnership? What are the risks or limits of partnership? How can we be a church that partners together with other churches/believers in God's mission?

Read Acts 18:24-19:10

Who is Apollos? What part(s) of his message is accurate? What is lacking?

How does Apollos come to a better understanding of the gospel? What does this show us about gospel partnership?

When Paul returns to Ephesus he meets a dozen men who are called ‘disciples’ (19:1)—but it seems they are disciples of John the Baptist, not Jesus.

How do these men respond as they learn things more accurately?

Re-read Acts 19:8-10 and fill out the following table

	In Ephesus
Where does Paul preach?	
How long does Paul stay?	
Who is with him?	
How did they partner together?	
How did people respond?	
What kind of opposition did the gospel face?	

Reflection

From what we’ve read today, what are some *not to be missed* elements of the gospel? What else might you add to this list (and where does the Bible say this)?

What are some ways the gospel might be inadequately proclaimed today? What is the problem with this? How can we guard against making this mistake?

Priscilla and Aquilla’s home theological studies with Apollos prove effective. How might this shape things in our church (Growth Groups, one on one Bible reading, etc.)? Who could you invite to join a Growth Group or read the Bible with you?

4. Called to Shepherd

Acts 19:11-20:38

What do you think makes a good leader (business/school/sport/politics/clubs)? Is there anything different for a Christian leader?

In the previous study, we heard how the gospel came to Ephesus. Paul's second visit to Ephesus lasted around two years (Acts 19:10). In this study we'll continue to read about Paul's second time in Ephesus and his final words to the elders of the Ephesian church.

Read Acts 19:11-41

How was the church strengthened through the unsuccessful exorcism by the sons of Sceva?

What causes the Ephesian mob¹ to riot?

How do these two chaotic events show the impact of the gospel on the Ephesian community?

Read Acts 20:1-16

(If you have time) Look at the map on page 15 and find the places visited by Paul and his companions in this journey.

What does the somewhat humorous (from our distance) happening to Eutychus show us about these early churches?

¹ The word translated *assembly* in verse 32 is the word normally translated *church* in the New Testament. The word *church* (or *assembly*) isn't a special religious word—it simply refers to a gathering.

Read Acts 20:17-38

What do we learn from this passage about how Christ governs his church?

What does Paul tell us about his (a) character, (b) motivation, and (c) practice of ministry?

What is the 'job description' for the Ephesians elders?

Reflection

How are Paul's ministry and the ministry of the Ephesians elders different from leadership we might see today?

What do we learn from this passage about what churches should look for in choosing leaders?

How can we encourage elders to be and do what Christ requires?

5. Courage and Conviction

Acts 21-23

Over the next few weeks we're going to hear Paul retell his story of how God saved him. At the start of these studies, we'll invite one or two people to (briefly) share how they came to trust in Jesus.

Read Acts 21:1-16

During this journey, Paul receives two prophetic messages. What is the content of these messages? How do Paul's companions respond to them? How does Paul respond?

Why do you think Paul responds this way?

Read Acts 21:17-26

Once again the 'problem' of Gentiles being included in God's people is raised. What is James' plan to subdue tensions? How does this course of action protect the freedom of the gospel?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-20. How do we see Paul putting this principle into practice?

Read Acts 21:27-22:29

Despite James and Paul's best efforts, some Jews are offended and Paul is arrested and almost flogged. What are the *key events* in this passage?

How does Paul 'make the most' of this opportunity for the gospel?

Paul tells the story of his life (his *testimony*). How does he proclaim Christ as he tells his story?

What element of Christian teaching causes offence? Is this surprising to you? Why or why not?

Read Acts 22:30-23:35

What are the *key events* in this passage? (You also might like to find some of the mentioned places on a map or in a Bible atlas.)

How does Jesus strengthen and protect Paul?²

Reflection

How can we both stand firm for gospel truth whilst being 'all things to all people' (1 Corinthians 9:22)?

How does Jesus continue to strengthen and protect his people today? How does knowing this strengthen your trust in God?

Fight for your rights?

During his 'trials,' Paul defends himself. He prevents himself from being flogged by declaring his Roman citizenship and after being struck by Ananias he rebukes the High Priest for punishing someone without trial. Why does Paul do this, and how does it fit with Jesus' command to 'turn the other cheek'?

In the ancient world, one way an accused person would defend their innocence was by bringing a counter-accusation. This is what we see Paul doing here—by accusing the Roman soldier and the High Priest of breaking their own rules he is saying 'I'm not guilty, you are.' Paul's defence isn't him standing up for his *rights* (i.e. his 'right' to freedom of speech or belief) but defending his *innocence*.

² You might like to read Romans 15:22-33 to hear more of Paul's perspective on how he had hoped to travel to Rome.

6. Trials

Acts 24-26

Like last week, have one or two people share how they came to trust in Jesus.

In Acts 21-23, Paul returned to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, he was arrested following a riot in the temple. Whilst awaiting trial, Paul was visited by Jesus and encouraged that he would testify to the good news of Jesus not only in Jerusalem but also in Rome (Acts 23:11).

At the end of Acts 23, we left Paul in Caesarea awaiting trial—having been transported from Jerusalem under armed guard.

Read Acts 24

What three charges are brought against Paul?

How does Paul respond to these charges? What is the real reason for the religious leaders' opposition?

Why does Paul remain in jail? How does this reflect on Felix and Drusilla?

Read Acts 25

Two years later there was a change in governors, Paul is still in jail, and the Jewish religious leaders are *still* intent on killing him!

Paul declares he is innocent on three accounts (25:8) Why do you think Paul insists on being tried by Caesar (9:25; 23:11)?

What does Festus think of Paul's legal situation?

Read Acts 26

At what point does Festus interject? What does he find unreasonable?

Key People

In these chapters we meet a number of significant historical figures—and it can be hard to keep track of who is who. This is a quick overview of who they are:

- **Claudius *Lysias***: Military commander (tribune—commanded 1000 soldiers) stationed in Jerusalem. He arrested Paul in Acts 22. He is a Roman citizen—but not by birth.
- ***Ananias***: The High Priest 48-59 AD (appointed by Agrippa II). We first meet him in Acts 23.
- ***Tertullus***: The professional prosecutor, who argued the Jewish leaders' case against Paul.
- **Antonius *Felix***: Governor of Judea 52-59 AD. Ancient historians consider him to have been brutal and incompetent.
- ***Druscilla***: Wife of Felix. Jewish. She is the sister of King Agrippa II.
- **Porcius *Festus***: Succeeds Felix as governor of Judea, 60-62 AD. Ancient historians consider him wise and just.
- **Herod *Agrippa* II**: Ruled various parts of Palestine from 48-100 AD. Great-grandson of Herod (the Great) who is king when Jesus is born. Grandson of Herod (Antipas) who was involved in Jesus' crucifixion.
- ***Bernice***: Sister of Agrippa II and Druscilla.
- ***Nero***: Emperor (Caesar) of Rome 54-68AD.

As Paul finishes giving his presentation, Agrippa wonders if Paul is trying to persuade him to become a Christian. How does Paul proclaim the gospel of Jesus during his defence? What does he proclaim about who Jesus is and the hope Jesus gives?

Reflection

In Acts 23:11, Paul is told God's mission for him. What things that occur in these chapters might make Paul wonder about God being in control? What things might have comforted him? How does this encourage us when we might question God's plans and control?

Throughout his imprisonment and numerous trials³ Paul appears to remain calm, respectful, and focused on Jesus' mission. How might we learn to respond in a similar way to difficult situations, including persecution?

³ There were more than these three—for example, Felix regularly 'conversed' with Paul (Acts 24:26).

Paul uses his 'testimony' to speak about Jesus. Can telling our own stories of knowing Jesus have the same purpose? When have you had opportunities to tell how and why you trust in Jesus?

PAUL'S THIRD MISSION ACTS 18:23 - 21:17 AD 53-57

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7. Through Many Dangers

Acts 27:1-28:10

Have you ever been in a deadly, perilous situation? What impact did it have on your trust in God?

Having been imprisoned for more than two years, finally Paul is on the move—to Rome. However, each section of this journey seems more perilous than the last!

Read Acts 27:1-28:10⁴

Looking back over Acts 27:1-12: how does God prepare Paul for what is about to happen?

Looking back over Acts 27:13-38: how does the storm give Paul opportunities to speak of Christ?

How does God preserve Paul through these trials? What do you think Paul may have learnt from being shipwrecked?

If being caught in a storm and shipwrecked on a strange island isn't bad enough, next thing we know, Paul is attacked by a snake! How does Paul bear witness to Christ through this?

Reflection

The account of Paul in the storm reminds us of the prophet Jonah. How is Paul similar to and different from the prophet?⁵

⁴ Yes, it's long—but it's a great story...you can't stop partway!

⁵ Briefly look at Jonah chapter 1 if you're not familiar with the story.

The journey to Rome was one crisis after another, yet Paul had firm confidence in God (see Acts 27:25). In 2 Corinthians 11:25, Paul reflects on the *three* times he was shipwrecked along with many other trials and dangers he faced as an apostle of Christ. **Read 2 Corinthians 12:9-10:** what did God teach Paul from these experiences? How might God use similar situations in our lives?

Times of chaos and crisis can be challenging to our faith in God. How do we learn from Paul's example to hold fast to God? What can we do to grow our trust in God before crisis comes?

PAUL'S JOURNEY TO ROME ACTS 27:1 - 28:16 AD 60-61

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8. Without Hindrance

Acts 28:11-31

Think back over our studies in Acts (we've been at it since the start of 2022). What things have occurred that, from a human perspective, have hindered the spread of the gospel?

Read Acts 28:11-16

Everywhere Paul goes in Italy he meets Christians. How does this impact Paul?

How do you think these Italians heard the gospel (have a look back at Acts 2:10)?

Much of the *plot* of Acts has followed the mission of well-known leaders—Peter, Paul, and others. But at the same time, the Holy Spirit has been growing the Word through 'ordinary' Christians and churches,.

Read Acts 28:17-22

For what reasons do you think Paul made it a priority to meet with the Roman Jewish leaders?

What impression do these Jewish leaders have of Christianity?

Read Acts 28:23-31

When Paul gets an opportunity to speak fully, what does he proclaim about Christ?

The work Holy Spirit has been a major feature of the book of Acts. From verse 25, what does this tell us about the work of the Spirit before Pentecost?

Why do you think Paul concludes his day-long deliberation with this quote from Isaiah?

Why do you think Luke has this as part of the conclusion of Acts? What do you think he is encouraging his readers (us!) to do?

After suffering many trials and dangers, Acts leaves Paul under house in Rome proclaiming Christ **without hindrance**. What does this tell us about God and his mission? What do you think Luke is encouraging his readers (us!) to do?

Reflection

The book of Acts tells how the gospel spread from 'Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (e.g. Rome)' (Acts 1:8). After almost 2000 years, what evidence is there of God continuing his mission?

How can we be taking our part in God's mission?

What hindrances are there for us in proclaiming the Kingdom of God?

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