



PREPARATION

- > **Spend the week studying the texts from Acts.** *Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools to enhance your preparation.*
- > **Determine** *which discussion points and questions will work best with your group.*
- > **Pray** *for our pastors and this week's message, the upcoming group time, your group members, and their receptivity to God's Word.*
- > **Focus on the Main Point.** *Before Jesus ascended into Heaven, He gave His disciples the Great Commission. While we await Jesus' return, we continue His work in the world by taking His gospel to the ends of the Earth.*

INTRODUCTION

When was the last time you had great news that you couldn't wait to share? What was it? Who did you tell?

How do you tend to go about sharing good news with others? Have you ever had great news that you did not want to share?

Author and theologian C.S. Lewis famously wrote, "All enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise." What Lewis meant was that, when we delight in something, we very naturally express our enjoyment of that thing. The book of Acts is filled with story after story of Christ-followers expressing and sharing their joy. The early church found the message of Jesus so important, so exciting, and so life-changing that they could not help but share that message with the world around them. Acts continued the story of God as His church shared the Gospel with the world.

LEARN

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ACTS 1:8.

Who was speaking in this verse? Who was He speaking to, and what direction did He give?

What does it mean to be a witness? How would the disciples have understood Jesus' directions? How should we understand them today?

Where were Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria? What would be analogous areas, in terms of proximity, to where we live today? Are all Christians called to physically go to the ends of the Earth?

How does the empowerment of the Holy Spirit fuel Christian witness? Would we be able to witness without Him?

A witness is someone who can testify to something they have seen, heard, or experienced. The disciples spent three years doing ministry with Jesus. They saw Him perform miracles, teach, calm the waves, raise the dead, and be raised from the dead Himself. Disciples of Christ, in Jesus' authority (Matt. 28:18) and through the power of the Holy Spirit, tell lost and dying people what they've learned about Jesus in order to lead others to find life in Him as well. And they are to do this in their city (Jerusalem), their region (Judea), the next region over (Samaria), and to all nations.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ACTS 9:1-9.

How does this passage describe Saul's mission before his conversion? What was his attitude toward Christianity? Why do you think he was so hostile?

Who does Jesus accuse Paul of persecuting? Why does this matter?

What do you think God was trying to teach Paul through blindness? Why do you think God make Him blind specifically?

Before Paul met Christ, he hated Jesus, imprisoning and breathing murderous threats towards believers. In doing all of this, Paul thought he was serving God. In Paul's mind and heart, he believed followers of Jesus were blaspheming the living God—until one day, on the road to Damascus, Paul came face to face with the risen and reigning Christ. Notice that Jesus didn't ask Paul why he was persecuting Christians, but why he was persecuting Jesus Himself. Christ so identifies with His church that to hurt His people is to hurt Him.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ACTS 17:16-34 AND 28:30-31.

Why was Paul's spirit provoked within him? How did this move Paul to action? What should our convictions about the gospel motivate us to do with the gospel?

How did Paul treat the people he shared the Gospel with? Do you get the sense that he respected and cared about them? Why or why not?

How did the people in the Areopagus respond to Paul? What should this teach us to expect as we share the Gospel with others?

What elements can you identify in Paul's Gospel presentation? When we communicate the Gospel to others, what are the most crucial elements to present?

Acts 17 is a good case study of Paul's ministry. Paul and his companions first went to the synagogues to preach Christ to the Jews, then moved on to the Gentiles. They took their commission from Christ so seriously that they were accused of "turning the world upside down" (17:6). Paul's encounter in the Areopagus is instructive in a few ways. Paul was genuinely disturbed to see God be dishonored by idol worship, and it motivated him to action. He shared Christ passionately and clearly, while showing respect and dignity to those with whom he shared. Some dismissed him immediately, but others asked to hear more.

Where is Paul at the close of the book of Acts? Why does he not let his circumstances deter him from sharing the Gospel?

The book ends with Paul in prison. This is where Paul wrote many of the letters that comprise much of our New Testament. Paul never let his circumstances stop him from sharing the Gospel. The message was simply too good and too necessary for Paul to stop speaking it to anyone who would listen.

LIVE

Is there anyone who seems "unsaveable" to you? Who do you know who is particularly opposed to Jesus? Pray earnestly for opportunities to share your faith with them.

Are you burdened to see people reached with the Gospel? What stops you from sharing the Gospel with boldness? What is one step you could take this week to cultivate a deeper desire to share Christ with the people around you?

LEAD

Paul continually made disciples by investing in others who were traveling with him. Luke, Timothy, Titus, and Mark were all examples of this. Who are you leading to live for Christ? How can you be intentional about making disciples?

How can you help carry the Gospel to the ends of the Earth? Will you commit to pray for the harvest (Luke 10:2), give to the work of ministry, and go to other places to make Christ known?

PRAY

Pray and thank God for advancing His church in our world today. Praise Him for saving you and for getting the Gospel message to you. Pray for the millions of people around the world today who have never heard the Gospel. Pray to the Lord of the harvest that He would send workers with the Gospel to the nations. Ask God to use Pinelake to make disciples that impact the nations, beginning with the members of your Small Group.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following:

1. Pray that God would use you and Pinelake to reach the ends of the Earth.
2. Review Acts 17. What can you learn from Paul about sharing the Gospel?
3. Memorize Acts 1:8.

COMMENTARY

ACTS 1:8.

Some have suggested that this key verse of our Bible may contain a threefold table of contents: Jerusalem, Acts 2:42–8:3; Judea and Samaria, Acts 8:4–12:24; ends of the earth, Acts 12:25–28:31. We cannot know if Luke had that kind of division in mind, but the book unfolds in a fascinating manner somewhat along that pattern. Notice that the call to witness is not limited to any select group of people, since it spreads from the apostles to the 120 believers and on throughout the pages of Acts. Nor can we restrict it only to service in our own churches or to some kind of “professional ministry.” Every believer should be a “world Christian,” able to function for the Savior from the other side of the street to the other side of the world.

ACTS 9:1-9.

As the word of God spread and the number of disciples increased, the church met strong opposition. Saul, who had held the clothing of those who stoned Stephen, was intent on destroying the church. This persecution was the most severe threat believers had faced in the church’s brief history. Saul was breathing out threats against the disciples. The verb translated “breathing out” also means “inhaling” or “being bent on” some activity. Saul was passionately persecuting, intent as a warhorse sniffing the smell of battle. Saul’s mission was to place believers—men or women—under arrest and bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. There they would stand trial before the Sanhedrin. Saul clearly identified himself as an enemy of Christ and His people.

As Saul and those traveling with him neared the completion of their journey to Damascus, an unusual event occurred: Saul encountered the resurrected and exalted Christ. A blinding light flashed around him, and he heard a voice questioning his mission to persecute Jesus (the resurrected Christ so identified with His people that He said the persecution was against Him personally). When Saul inquired about the identity of the One speaking to him, he used the title Lord. Saul quickly learned the Lord’s identity and soon learned the deeper significance of the lordship of Christ in his life.

After securing Saul’s full attention and revealing His identity as the risen Christ, Jesus commanded Saul to go into Damascus and await further instructions. Saul was not told what his mission or purpose was; that was reserved for when he encountered Ananias in Damascus. This step-by-step introduction kept him

from being overwhelmed with the changes Jesus was initiating in his life, and it also allowed the Christians in Damascus to meet and accept the one whom they feared. This is the first of three accounts of Saul's conversion that appear in the Book of Acts (Acts 22:6-11; 26:12-18).

Saul's encounter with Jesus also impacted him physically. He was unable to see when he got up from the ground. His traveling companions had to lead him by the hand into Damascus. For three days Saul was blind and did not eat or drink anything. His meeting with Jesus was a traumatic experience that would change his life.

ACTS 17: 16-32.

Paul and his fellow missionaries traveled to Thessalonica where he followed his usual pattern of beginning his witness in the synagogue. After preaching there, opposition developed; and Paul had to abandon his synagogue witness. Many believed, however, (17:1-4). Eventually Jewish opponents stirred up a riot against Paul and Silas, and they went to Berea, 50 miles southwest of Thessalonica. Paul found the synagogue there more receptive to his teaching and led the people in serious Bible study. Jews eventually came from Thessalonica and incited crowds in Berea against Paul. Paul fled to Athens in the southern Greek province of Achaia (17:10-15).

In Athens, Paul encountered all sorts of people from many religious backgrounds. Athens was the intellectual center of the Roman empire, filled with teachers and students of every persuasion. Paul was especially upset by the many idols throughout the city. It was filled with temples and shrines, lavishly decorated with images of the gods.

Paul was disgusted by the idolatry. It was a testimony to the polytheistic error of Greek religion. They worshiped the many gods of Olympus rather than the one true God. In Athens Paul preached in the synagogue on Sabbaths and on weekdays to whoever passed by in the marketplace. The Greek philosophers were curious about the new message Paul was preaching. The philosophers led Paul to a meeting of the Areopagus.

Paul began by seeking to win the good will of his audience and sought to gain attention by introducing something thoroughly familiar to the Athenians: the altar to an unknown god. The idol Paul referred to was a particularly blatant example of the religiosity of the Athenians. They had room for all the gods, known or unknown. Paul seized his opportunity to introduce them to the one true God. He proclaimed to them the God they did not know was the only One that counts, the only One that exists. In speaking of their ignorance of this God, Paul was striking at the very self-identity of the philosophers.

Although Paul confined himself to clear Bible teachings, he presented them in a manner that would have been understood by the Athenians. Paul first presented God as Creator. Stoics were pantheistic. They did not believe in a divine Creator. He drew a further conclusion that the Creator of all that exists needs nothing from His creation such as idols or any other external form of human piety.

Paul's first teaching focused on God's distance from us; the second emphasized His nearness. Paul argued that we turn things upside down when we worship idols. Idolatry fashions God after earthly likenesses. That leads to worshiping the creation rather than the Creator. We are truly God's image when we know Him through faith in Christ and reflect Him in our lives, living so as to point beyond ourselves to God.

The Athenians' idolatry was a sign of their sinfulness Paul proceeded to the next step: he called on his hearers to repent, to turn from their sins to God. God had overlooked their sins of ignorance in the sense that He had not brought to them the judgment they deserved. He had instead sent the gospel to them. God now commanded them to repent. If we fail to repent in light of the gospel, only judgment remains for us.

Paul's address was cut short by mockers who found the idea of Jesus' resurrection to be foolish. (See 1 Cor. 1:23-24.) A second group were unconvinced, but still open. They wanted to hear more. But the third group believed.

ACTS 28:30-31.

For two years Paul awaited his trial before Caesar. He probably did not even note the passage of time. He was too busy witnessing to all who came to see him. This had been the story of Paul's entire ministry. He preached to everyone. He adapted his approach to his audience. To the Jews he preached as a Jew; to the Gentiles he became as a Gentile—all with the single goal of leading everyone to Christ (1 Cor. 9:19-23). Paul also adapted his witness to his personal circumstances. For example, he wrote the Philippians about how his imprisonment had not hampered his testimony about the gospel. Instead, the gospel flourished as he witnessed even to the prison guards and as his own bold testimony challenged other Christians to greater witnessing (Phil. 1:12-14).

Paul's message of the Kingdom and his words about Jesus were closely related. God's kingdom is His kingly rule in people's lives. Jesus brought God's kingdom to us and made it possible for us to be a part of God's people when He died and removed the barrier of sin that separates us from God. When we accept Christ, we belong to God's kingdom; His Spirit rules in our lives.