

THE TRIUMPHS OF THE GOSPEL

Study 1

THE MAN OF MACEDONIA

Read

Acts 16

Whilst we are not going to study **chapter 15** in detail, we cannot overlook it altogether. It records what has come to be known as the Council of Jerusalem. (The first verse of the chapter records the issue at stake). Judaistic teachers are saying “**Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.**” We have to think carefully of what this implies. If you read the account of the early preaching of Peter and Paul, you will find that all that was needed for salvation was belief in the Lord Jesus, **(13: 38-39)**. These men were now adding a new demand - circumcision and the Law of Moses. At the Council of Jerusalem the matter was thrashed out. The fact that Gentiles had heard the Gospel and believed was clearly stated, **(15: 6-9)**. It was by faith they were cleansed. To put other demands on them was “**testing God**”. **(15: 10) Note verse 11, “We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, in the same manner.”** How thankful we can be that such a decision was reached.

15: 22-25 give the findings of the Council. It was a hard struggle and these false teachers gave much trouble to the Apostles as we shall see later in our studies. Always remember when you study Paul’s letters to Romans, Galatians and Colossians that he had such teachers in view. Nothing else but faith in the finished work of Christ is needed for salvation.

We now look at **chapter 16**. **Verse 5** is another of those climaxes which mark a distinct stage in the story Luke was telling. From this point Paul moves into a wider phase of expansion in Gospel activity. Look at **verses 6-10** carefully. They tell us something very important. Paul and Silas move through Phrygia and Galatia. They were moving west. If we ask why - the answer is given to us: “**they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the Word in Asia.**” Look at these places on the map. They want to visit Bithynia but “**the Spirit did not permit them**” (**verse 7**), so they come to Troas (**verse 8**). It is here that the dream is given to Paul which asks him to come to Macedonia, **(verses 9 & 10)**. We learn here that the early Apostles were men who waited for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and were willing to go where He led. We, in the western world today, can be glad that Paul and Silas obeyed the voice of the Spirit. Through them the Gospel eventually came into Europe. They were sure that God called them to preach in Macedonia. Remember that God is willing to guide those who are ready to follow. Through His Work and by His Spirit we can be guided. Are you willing to follow God’s guidance?

So begins the entrance of the Gospel into the big cities of Greek civilisation. A different culture met the Apostles. All the idolatry and corruption of paganism was found in these places. The Gospel penetrated now, not into the strongholds of orthodox Jewish religion, but into the mystery and superstition of pagan worship. Remember - there was only one message. You will notice that, although Paul and Silas presented the Word in a different form, the basic message was the same. Study carefully what was preached and compare it with the earlier sermons recorded by Luke. I feel **Romans 1: 16** sums up the tremendous confidence Paul had in the message he preached. Would you agree?

Philippi was the first of the great cities visited by the Apostles. Great things were done there in the face of bitter opposition. God was able to touch many lives there and a local Church was established. Later Paul wrote a lovely letter to the Christians at Philippi. **Chapter 16** tells of three important encounters with three vastly different people. We can summarise them as follows:

1. Lydia - a worshipper of God whose heart was opened. **(16: 14-15)**
2. A girl - a demon-possessed pagan whose evil heart was cleansed. **(16: 16-18)**
3. A man - a jailer whose hard heart was broken. **(16: 30-34)**

These three conversions illustrate how the Gospel meets every human need and is powerful enough to deal with every situation. Lydia’s open heart led to an open home and a place of gathering for all who knew Christ. Notice **verse 14** - it was the Lord who opened her heart. Often it is just the gentle influence of the better things the Gospel offers that brings salvation. It seemed that way with Lydia and it gave the Apostles their first foothold in Philippi.

It was vastly different with the demon-possessed girl. It took a direct command in the name of Jesus to rid her heart of the evil spirit. There was no compromise as far as Paul was concerned. Satan’s power had to be broken. I always feel that this was a symbolic challenge to all the forces of Satan that the Apostles were to meet. **(verses 16-23)**

Lastly, a different picture again with the Jailer. Through the undaunted courage and joy of persecuted Christians, and an earthquake from God, he is brought to his knees. “**What must I do to be saved?**”, he cried. Paul gives in **verse 31** the answer which not only led to his conversion, but which has down the centuries led to the salvation of very many needy sinners. “**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.**”

So it was that the first Christians were established amidst Western paganism. The Lord Jesus had instructed His disciples to go to “**the end of the earth**” **(1: 8)**. This chapter records a further expansion of witness.

Study 2

THE BIG CITIES

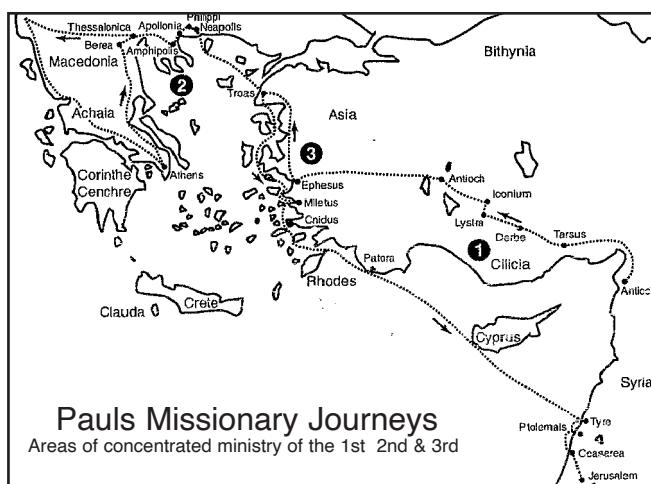
Read

Acts chapters 17-19

Our study of the progress of the Gospel now takes us to the great cities of the Greek world. It is good to get the sense of movement as Luke tells the story. The great routes were used by the Apostles. It meant they could travel reasonably quickly, thus aiding the spread of the Word of God. **Chapter 19: 20** forms the last climax in the book and it tells us that in a mighty way the Word of God prevailed. From there on Paul moves with determination to Jerusalem and finally to Rome. Here he was to pay the final price for his faithfulness to Christ. Tradition says that he was beheaded.

Paul's journeys cover five great cities in these chapters. All were centres of Greek culture. Some of them, like **Corinth**, were noted everywhere for their corruption and immorality. Others, like **Athens**, were noted for their intellectual culture and studies in ancient philosophy. **Ephesus** was the centre of pagan mysteries and worship. Here, as we shall see, was the great temple of Diana, the Goddess of the Ephesians. This temple was reported to have descended out of heaven. Every form of vice was often associated with pagan idolatry. Often the gods were linked with terrible and evil things. They were feared and had to be placated by diligent means. Into such cities the wonderful Christian message came. Let us pay a brief visit to each of the five cities.

Paul and Silas first visited **Thessalonica**, **17: 1-9**. It seemed to be quite a brief visit. You will notice that in each place they seek out the Jewish Synagogue. These were known centres of Jewish religion and culture. It is obvious that Greeks found their way into them and were at least spectators of the Jewish worship. Many became proselytes - associated with the Jewish religion. It was at Thessalonica that Paul taught and reasoned in the Synagogue for three Sabbaths. Notice his message (**verse 3**) **Verse 4** shows the result - Gentiles were both impressed and converted. The letter Paul wrote to the Church in this place - his first, by the way - shows that bitter affliction followed in the lives of those who accepted Christ as Saviour. Look at **1 Thessalonians 1: 9-10** and read this for yourself.



Jewish hostility met the Apostles in all their activities in Greek cities. This casts a sad reflection on all their privileges. Notice in **verse 6** that they call those who witnessed for Christ "**these who have turned the world upside-down.**" Christianity certainly brought a revolution. Wrong values were overthrown - right things were established. Really, the world was being turned the right way up! Because of persecution the Apostles had to move on to the next city - **Berea**. There was something special about those who believed in Berea. They did what we could well do more often. They not only received the Word, but they searched the Scriptures daily to see if the truths they were taught were the truth. Do you just 'soak up' teaching like a sponge, taking what is said to you without question? Or, do you read your Bible for yourself to see if the teaching is true? Luke tells us that this made the Bereans more noble (fair-minded) than the Thessalonians. (**17: 10-12**)

Through Jewish opposition Paul now moves on to **Athens**, while Silas and Timothy stay at Berea. Notice **chapter 16: 1-4**, which show how Timothy came into contact with Paul. It was an important contact. At **Athens**, Paul meets the intellectuals of Greek thought and philosophy. He is appalled by the idolatry (**17: 16**). It was a city full of idols. Fearlessly he reasons with the people in the Synagogue and in the market-place. I suggest that you study carefully his address on Mars Hill. (Areopagus) It is a masterpiece of reasoned speech. Contrast the idol which was "**unknown**" with the "**known God**" of whom Paul speaks, (**verse 23-29**). **Verses 32-34** tell how the people responded. There were **mockers**, some were **undecided**, while others became **believers**. The Gospel divides society today as it did in Paul's day.

When Paul comes to **Corinth** he finds friends (**chapter 18**). Aquila and Priscilla open their home to him and as a tent-maker he is able to work with them. He is not above doing manual work, even though he is a great messenger of God. It teaches us a valuable lesson. Here was a man who could be fully occupied with the business of the Gospel. You will notice how deeply involved he was with teaching the Word of God to believers in this city. The Church established in Corinth soon had its problems, as Paul's two letters to the Corinthians clearly show. For eighteen months he teaches the Word of God to them (**verse 11**). Yet he works with his hands to show that he is willing to earn his material needs. Let us learn from this that God wants us to be humble, considerate servants - those who not only preach, but who are also willing to do the humble tasks in life.

Our final visit is to **Ephesus**. Here Paul eventually spends about two years, teaching all who came to him. Notice **chapter 19: 9-10**. All kinds of people from every part of Asia came to hear God's Word. It is obvious that great things were done in this centre of Greek culture. It was here that those who had partially accepted the faith entered fully into the experience of baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. Notice that, as at Jerusalem and Samaria, this small group of believers spoke in tongues. So that, in the Gentile world also, the fulness of the Spirit was evident. Especially notice the stir that the conversion of just one man could cause (**verses 23-41**). It teaches us that when people are saved the devil is hurt deeply and he seeks to undermine God's kingdom.

Study 3

DEFENDING THE FAITH

Read

Acts chapters 22-26

This study covers quite a large part of Luke's record of the movements of Paul. It is obvious that from **chapter 20: 5** on, Luke was with Paul and his companions as they went to Jerusalem and towards Rome. You will find quite clearly the "**they**" sections of Acts and the "**we**" sections which show that Luke was present and an eye witness to the events.

One thing is evident in these chapters we study - Paul knew where he was going and was determined to press on. **Chapter 19: 21-22** is vital to the understanding of this. Paul "**purposed in the Spirit**" to go to Jerusalem and then to see Rome. Nothing could deter him. We notice how his well-wishers would have stopped him. We can see here how deeply Paul was involved in doing the will of God. Does this not also apply to us? We need to be serious about doing the will of God. Notice **Philippians 1: 3-12** where Paul tells how he is involved in the "**furtherance**" of the Gospel and he is set for its defence.

Consider what this sense of purpose meant for Paul. It meant that at all costs, even at times seemingly against common sense, he moved forward. He knew what awaited him for he stated this to the elders at Ephesus (**Acts 20: 22-23**). His commitment to the work of the Gospel was more important to him than his life (**20: 24**). He was absolutely determined to finish his course and to honour the trust that was his. People who are sure of their call and commitment are always fearless in the work they do for God. Without doubt God was with Paul and gave him encouragement. **Chapter 23: 11** is a wonderful tonic to read. God was just giving his faithful servant a reminder that He was with him. This is a lovely touch to the story.

We see also the perils that faced Paul. He faced dangers that were critical. **Chapter 21: 27-36 & 22: 12-25** illustrate how dangerous things were. The opposition came from some Jews who had followed Paul from Asian cities. They accused him of teaching things contrary to the Law and defiling the Temple. It is clear that no brutality was spared in inflicting pain on Paul and eventually they demanded his death. The fanaticism of these religious leaders is evident. But so is the fearlessness of the Apostle. He was unmoved by the intrigues and insults directed against him.

We learn something of the cost of faithfulness to the Lord Jesus from the life of Paul. In **Philippians 3: 10** he speaks of "**the fellowship of His sufferings**". When the way was hard, and suffering came, he felt he was just sharing in some of those things that Christ had suffered. Remember that faithfulness costs, often very much - yet we only follow in the Saviour's steps. Notice that in the perils that he endured, Paul knew the protection of the Lord. This is clear from Luke's record of his movements. **Chapter 23** tells of the way in which Paul's nephew overheard the plotting which would have ended Paul's life. Was this by chance? Through it Paul's safety was procured. It is quite amazing how an armed guard is provided to bring him as far as Caesarea. Paul's Roman citizenship also stood him in good stead when he tactfully revealed it (**22: 25-29**). God has planned that the apostle should reach Rome and He

kept him safe until he arrived.

It is interesting to read, in this closing section of Acts, separate pleas that Paul makes in defence of the Gospel. They really consist of his personal Christian testimony. They were given to different people who either sought his life or were seeking to put a proper value upon the accusations that were made against him. You will find these testimonies in the following passages: -

Chapter 22: 1-21 - To those who were seeking to take him.

Chapter 24: 10-21 - To Felix the Governor.

Chapter 26: 1-23 - To Herod Agrippa.

Notice how Felix lost the opportunity that was given to him, recorded in **chapter 24: 22-26**. (It is foolish to let opportunities to accept Christ go by).

I suggest that you study these passages side by side - notice their similarities. You will find especially that Paul always spoke of the time when he first met with Christ on the road to Damascus. It seems that the longer he lived the more vital this was to his way of life. It is always good to feel the thrill of conversion - to look back with gratitude to our first encounter with the Saviour. We need to go with the Lord, of course - "**go on to perfection**" (**Hebrews 6: 1**). But it is great to re-live again sometimes, our first joy of conversion - especially when, like Paul, we tell others about it. Paul consistently testified to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. You will notice that this is the crowning point of his testimony - for him Jesus was alive! Ask yourself what Christian living would be (if it could be at all) if the Lord Jesus were not really a living Saviour. Paul had appealed to Caesar! (**25: 11-12**). He knew the scene was set for his final journey to Rome. He also knew that this was inevitable but he willingly moved in obedience to the will of his God.

Study 4

THE UNFINISHED TASK

Read

Acts chapter 28

We come to our final study in Acts. Have you enjoyed the record that Luke gives us of the movements of early Christianity? It is a tremendous story of the testimony of men and women whose lives were bound up with a living Saviour. The record begins in Jerusalem - it ends in Rome, at the very heart of the Roman Empire. Think about this fact. We notice that Paul had appealed to Caesar. Eventually he did stand before the great Emperor. Here was a follower of the crucified Jesus - he who was once a persecutor, but who was now willing to face the judgement of Rome for his faith. Yet perhaps more than this, the course of the Gospel had travelled rapidly thus far. Soon there would be a Christian Church in Rome itself and there would be saints in Caesar's household (**Philippians 4: 22**). Remember, there are no barriers that the power of the Gospel cannot break down.

Read **chapter 27**. It is an interesting story of the perils of travelling by sea. Paul was going to Rome. Maybe Satan was out to stop that process. With the storm, the lives of the party were endangered, and in the eventual shipwreck all could have been lost. Notice Paul's confidence as he took command of the situation. One man and his God were able to command great respect and achieve great things. Notice especially **27: 21-25**. It shows us the tremendous quality of Paul's faith - "**Therefore**

take heart ...I believe God". (27: 25) Amidst all the upsets of life, with all the contrary winds of uncertainty, trust in God brings victory. Eventually, through storm and tempest, through shipwreck and even the threat of perishing, all arrived safely at Rome. Remember God's promise in **chapter 23: 11** "**you have testified for Me in Jerusalem so you must also bear witness at Rome.**"

So Paul eventually reaches Rome. (**chapter 28**) It is quite refreshing to see how he values the fellowship of other Christians there. It could have been that when he arrived, he was feeling alone and adrift. The brethren met him (**verse 15**), and he was so encouraged - "**he thanked God and took courage**". Perhaps we can take a point for ourselves here. It is always good to encourage our Christian friends. Just to meet them or talk to them may bring great comfort and they will thank God that they met us. Fellowship is a two-way activity. We need it - but we should always be ready to give it as well.

When Paul arrived at Rome (**chapter 28**), he was allowed quite a measure of freedom. Perhaps we could describe his position as being under house arrest. He was able to engage in spreading the Gospel. Many came to him. We notice that he first of all invited Jews to meet him (**verse 17**). He wanted to make his position clear. He appealed to Caesar - for "**the hope of Israel**" he is bound. (**verses 19-20**) It is obvious that he received no sympathy from his own people. They did not know him, and perhaps did not even want to. The "sect" to which he belonged was everywhere held in disrepute (**verse 22**). There is something of scorn in the way they spoke about it. As always, there was division between those who believed and those who did not. Notice **verses 25-27** carefully. The prophet Isaiah gave a relevant judgment on the state of heart of the Jewish people. In his day they were hardened to the message of God. Paul found the same, and it is tragic that Luke ends his record with the Jews set aside, while the salvation of God is sent to the Gentiles. (**verse 28**) We have noted this before, but let us notice it once again. Light refused brings even greater darkness. How essential that we open our hearts and minds willingly to the light of God's Word.

Luke records an unfinished task. Let us end by considering this. **Verses 30-31** record an activity which is, as far as we know, still going on. Of course, we know Paul was executed and his ministry ceased. Compare **2 Timothy 4** in this connection. But what about the progress of Christianity? We can learn from the unfinished nature of Acts, three great lessons:

1. The **value** of the message of the early Church does not and will not change. It was the answer to the needs of society in Paul's day. It is the only answer today. When you witness to your unsaved friends, you can use the same message about the same person as Paul and the other Apostles did. The changeless Gospel!
2. The **power** for witness is still the same today. The Holy Spirit is still here. We can still pray as the early Christians did. Remember this, that the two greater agencies of power for Christians today are prayer and the power of the Spirit.

3. God's **purpose** is still the same. **Acts 28:30-31** makes this clear. He wanted to reach men and women in Rome, so He sent Paul there. Where is God sending you? He is still using men and women, young and old, to reach those who need His salvation. Until Jesus comes again, it is the unfinished task. When He comes again, the Church which had its beginning at Pentecost will be unanimously complete.

Questions

Study 1

THE MAN OF MACEDONIA

1. What decision was made at the "Council of Jerusalem" in **Acts 15**?
2. Who forbade the disciples to go into Asia with the Gospel?
3. How do we know from our study that Paul and Silas were willing to go where God led them?
4. Which of the three that we have read about in **Acts 16** was demon-possessed, and how was she dealt with?
5. What brought the jailer to his knees, and what was his cry?

Study 2

THE BIG CITIES

1. Give two facts about God which Paul includes in his address on Mars Hill (Areopagus) at Athens.
2. What practical lesson can we learn from the Bereans?
3. What were Athens and Ephesus noted for?
4. Describe the attitude of the Jews to Paul as he visited these cities.
5. What happened when the Holy Spirit fell on the believers at Ephesus?

Study 3

DEFENDING THE FAITH

1. Why was Paul so willing to go on - even to Rome?
2. What incident did God use to deliver Paul from the Jews who had sworn to kill him?
3. What did God say to Paul when He appeared to him? (**Chapter 23**)
4. Give two outstanding points from the 'testimonies' of Paul.
5. Christ is alive! What difference do you think would be made to Christianity if this were NOT true?

Study 4

THE UNFINISHED TASK

1. How does Paul show his stature as a Christian when he was sailing in the storm?
2. What miracle took place on the island of Malta?
3. Give two of the marks of Jewish unbelief which Paul quotes from Isaiah.
4. What did the fellowship of other believers cause Paul to do when he reached Rome?
5. Acts records an unfinished task. Give two reasons why this is so.