



St Helen's
Bishopsgate

BIBLE STUDY RESOURCES

Acts



Please note: Acts studies begin with Acts 2:14-47.

Acts 2:14-47

AIM

- To see that the Spirit's coming at Pentecost indicates that the 'last days' promised by the OT prophets and inaugurated by the Messiah has begun.
- To understand that the only right response in the last days is to align ourselves with Christ and His people.

CONTEXT

- The events of Pentecost (2:1-11) led some to ask 'What does this mean?' (2:12) while others mockingly attributed the events to drunkenness (2:13). Peter therefore seeks to explain the events to those Jews who are listening.
- It is helpful to remember the task of the apostles to witness to the Lord Jesus in Jerusalem first (1:8). Peter is addressing Jews and does so within a context that they will readily recognise - that of the OT prophets.

STRUCTURE

The passage can be seen as providing firstly an answer to the question raised in v12, and secondly, a challenge to call on the name of Jesus who is both Lord and Christ.

THE LAST DAYS ARE HERE, SO CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD (2:14-21)

- Peter, having been tasked with witnessing to Jesus in Jerusalem and beyond (1:8) explains to those listening that the events which so amazed and confused them are not due to drunkenness, for it was only 'nine o'clock in the morning' but rather, this that they had experienced was that promised by Joel (Joel 2:28-32).
- The change in 2:17 from 'afterwards' (Joel 2:28) to 'in the last days' is Peter's way of emphasising that the long awaited 'last days' of God's plan of redemption had arrived.
- It is unclear how Peter and the early church understood the signs and wonders described in v19-20. Some argue that they should be seen as literal events, in which case they either began at Jesus' crucifixion when the sun 'turned to darkness', or are only to be expected when Jesus returns again. Others contend that they are to be understood metaphorically as convulsions in history. Whichever is the case, we should not get side-tracked into missing the wood for the trees. Peter's main point is clear. The 'last days' have begun.
- Note also how Joel goes on to call for a response (2v21) leads logically to the proclamation of Jesus as Lord in 2:22-36.

JESUS, WHO YOU KILLED, IS BOTH LORD AND CHRIST (2:22-36)

- These verses follow on from the quotation of Joel 2:28-32 and seek to explain to the Jewish audience (2:22, 29) that the 'Lord' on whose name they are to call in order to be saved (2:21) is Jesus of Nazareth. In addition many Jews believed that the coming of the Messiah would lead to the inauguration of the 'last days' (Mal 3; Zech 1:4), and may well have been asking, in the light of all that was going on in Jerusalem, "if the 'last days' have arrived (2:17) where is the Christ?"
- v22-23 remind the reader that Peter's witness is to a man (Jesus of Nazareth) but also to one 'accredited by God' through his clearly supernatural miracles, signs and wonders. Both the Jews and 'wicked men' (probably a reference to the Roman authorities) as responsible for Jesus' death. As too was God (23).
- v24-32 remind us that Peter's witness is supremely to Jesus' resurrection; the work of God that raised Christ from the grave (27). Clearly David could not have been referring to himself, as he was buried and his tomb stood as a perpetual reminder of his bodies decay (29). Therefore the Jews should have realised from the scriptures, on hearing of Jesus' resurrection, that He was the 'Christ' who would usher in the 'last days' of salvation.

- v32-35 pick up on the theme of Jesus being at God's 'right hand' from Ps 16:8 (33-34, cf 2:25), and claims that not only is ps 16 fulfilled in Jesus, but so is Ps 110. From His exalted position at God's right hand Jesus has poured out the Holy Spirit (2:33) - the event that prompted their initial amazement. Jesus in the gospels interpreted Ps 110 as a messianic psalm and applied it to himself (Luke 20:41-44). Peter is therefore on solid ground when proclaiming that David was prophesying about the resurrection of Jesus in Ps 16 and the exultation of Jesus in Ps 110.

Peter reaches the climax of his sermon in v36, declaring that 'God's resurrection and exultation of Jesus accredits Him as mankind's Lord and Israel's Messiah' (Longenecker) and calls on all the house of Israel to recognise this reality - that the resurrection of Jesus is God's declaration that the messianic work has been accomplished, that Jesus therefore has the right to assume the messianic title and that His exultation is God's declaration of His Lordship.

SO STAND WITH CHRIST AND HIS PEOPLE (2:37-47)

The awful reality hit home! The Jesus they had rejected and killed is both Lord and Christ (2:36). The one they crucified is both Lord and Christ. So in deep anguish ('cut to the heart') they asked 'what should we do?'

Peter's reply in v38 is that they must:

- i. Repent: ie. have a complete change of mind about Jesus and their attitude to Him.
- ii. Be baptized: ie. make a public declaration of this change in mind and change in allegiance, moving away from those who continue to reject Jesus ('this corrupt generation') and instead identify with the one whom they have previously rejected ('in the name of Jesus').

This response was demanded individually from everyone present ('every one of you').

Two great gifts flow from such a change of mind and allegiance - forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit. In the light of their clear rejection of Jesus (2:22-23), such forgiveness of sins is immense. Moreover the Spirit Himself would be given to each individual who recognised Jesus as Lord.

The 'promise' can be taken to refer specifically to the gift of the Spirit (1:4, 2:33), but as both the gift of the Spirit and forgiveness of sins are so tightly bound together in Peter's thinking, it may be better to understand 'promise' as referring to both.

It is made clear in v39 that the opportunity that exists in these 'last days' to call on the name of the Lord (2:21) is not only for those present with Peter on the day of Pentecost but also for future generations, and those who 'are far off' (probably, given 22:21, a reference to Gentiles). Three thousand responded to Peter's warnings and pleadings by taking the radical step of aligning themselves with Christ (40-41).

Verses 42-47 suggest that this change wasn't done in splendid isolation - but represented leaving 'a corrupt generation' to join others in community who had also made this radical change. In many ways these few verses summarise much of the first section of Acts (1:1-6:7), in that:

- The believers are devoted to the apostles teaching, to one another, to 'breaking of bread', and to prayer
- The attendant amazement and favourable response of onlookers (43, 47)
- God adds to His church (47b)

Although such narrative is descriptive rather than prescriptive, it can serve as a healthy rebuke to v21 Christian individualism.

IMPLICATIONS

Given that we like Peter and his hearers, are in the 'last days', (the time of opportunity (v21)) how should we respond? What distracts us from this opportunity? How can we make the most of it?

In what ways does this passage challenge our understanding of Jesus? Of the Holy Spirit?

Acts 3:1-4:4

AIM

- To understand that the 'name' of Jesus refers to both his character and purposes.
- To understand that all the OT promises and hopes are fulfilled in Jesus.

CONTEXT

Jesus has ascended to heaven. The agenda for the last days has been established. The Apostles are to witness to Jesus. They have been called by Jesus and empowered by the Spirit. Their witness has begun and the people of God are being formed.

Luke is recording the apostles testimony to all they have witnessed so that Theophilus (and we) may be certain of the gospel and that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promises (Lk 1:1-4).

STRUCTURE

- 3:1-11 The Sign
- 3:12:12-26 The Sermon
- 4:1-4 The startling results

THE SIGN (3:1-11)

Luke begins to record the ministry activities of the apostles. Peter and John go to the temple as he has described in 2:46. The detail here is typical of Luke's approach (Lk 1:3). The request for money is met with an extraordinary response from Peter. His use of the phrase 'in the name of Jesus' (v6) is far more than a prayer for Jesus to heal. In Jewish thought an individual's name was understood to contain the very nature of an individual. Peter's use of the phrase released the power and nature of the risen and ascended Lord.

V7-9 describe the healing and it's results. The man is instantly made completely well and Luke emphasises this by his repeated use of the word 'jumping' which not only reports the event itself but alludes to the fulfilment of earlier prophecies of restoration (cf. Is 35:6). The man praises God (cf. Is 35:10) which is the right response to Jesus (Acts 2:47).

THE SERMON (3:12-26)

JESUS' NAME ESTABLISHED (12-16)

- Peter uses this act of compassion (cf. 4:9) to witness about Jesus. It is essential that the astonished crowd do not think it is the apostles godliness or anything in themselves that gives them the power to act in such a way. He establishes that it is Jesus' nature and his power alone that has healed the lame man. (12, 13, 16).
- Most of the sermons in Acts have a similar argument and structure that can be summarised as 'You (or they) killed him; God raised him; We saw him (and bear witness to it)'. Peter emphasises this again here but in so doing expands on the theme of Jesus' name.
- Peter uses several different ways to explain who Jesus is and what he doing:
 - God's servant* an OT title for the Messiah (cf. Is 42:1-3, 52:12-13).
 - The holy and righteous one* the nature of Jesus is pointed out. He is the source of true godliness.
 - The author of life* the one who is alive now in heaven, gives life, healing and will restore everything (3:16, 19, 21)
- By using the phrase 'by faith' in v16 Peter points again to Jesus. The miracle was not done by the apostles but by Jesus. They could do it because they know Jesus (16). Peter is keen to emphasise that Jesus is the source of faith so even that cannot be credited to them (16). By referring to Jesus' 'name', Peter is referring to the power and nature of the risen Lord together with all that he is and all that he has done. The significance of the term is not lost on the authorities (4:17).

GOD'S PROMISE EXECUTED (3:17-26)

Peter now explains that all of God's promises are fulfilled in Jesus. He refers again to the planned suffering of God's servant (3:18 cf. 2:23, Is 53).

- Jesus is the source of hope because he is the one who brings forgiveness (19). The phrase 'times of refreshing' asserts that the promises of restoration spoken by the OT prophets, and on which the hopes of Israel rested, are fulfilled in Jesus (eg. cf. Jer 15:19, 16:15, Is 41:17-18, Ez 34:23-31; 36:24-27). Jesus ascended into heaven but he will return to bring God's work to completion (21, cf. 1:11).
- Peter's description of Jesus as a prophet like Moses (cf. Deut 18:15, 18, 19) is carefully chosen to warn his Jewish audience that life is available in Jesus but that if he is rejected there is no hope.
- In v24 he reinforces the point that all the prophets have pointed to Jesus. As Jews his message is for them. God promised Abraham that he would bless all peoples through his offspring (cf. Gen 22:18, 26:4). Jesus is the offspring; God's servant sent to the Jews to rescue them if they will repent (3:19, 26). Their hope is in Jesus' name.

THE STARTLING RESULTS (4:1-4)

The opposition begins. The same leaders who were in conflict with Jesus over his teaching in the temple courts (cf. Lk 20:1-2) and were amongst those directly involved in his arrest and crucifixion now have to deal with his followers proclaiming his name. (4:2). It is not surprising that they are fiercely opposed to Peter and John. The surprise, which Luke draws to our attention, is that although the apostles are jailed the message is not constrained. The gospel is powerful and not hindered by opposition.

Dibs

Are we to expect signs and wonders in the name of Jesus today?

The miracle recorded here has a particular purpose - the authentication of Jesus' continued ministry.

Throughout his ministry Jesus had revealed who he was and what he was doing by performing miracles (cf. Lk 7:20-23, Acts 2:33). The miracles in Acts authenticate the apostles' witness to the power of the risen and ascended Lord (Acts 4:29-30) and His continuing work in taking the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Hence they are historically specific but nevertheless continue to bear witness to us today of the power and work of Christ.

(It is perhaps interesting to note that despite these miraculous signs the authorities refused to believe in the name of Jesus (4:16-17, cf. Luke 6:10-11).

IMPLICATIONS

The apostles proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah who ushers in the new age. It is seen that forgiveness and restoration are available in Jesus who is presently ascended and will return to 'restore everything'.

Luke wants us as his readers to consider his record of events and to know three things:

1. The certainty of these events as actually having happened.
2. That the apostles continuing ministry is a gospel ministry.
3. That all that happened was the fulfilment of all that God had promised.

It may be worth reflecting on the following:

- Is my understanding of Jesus in line with Peter's description here?
- Am I confident in the apostles witness to Jesus?
- Do I rejoice in God's purposes as fulfilled in Jesus?
- Does my witness include the reality of Jesus?

Acts 5:12- 6:7

AIM

- To understand that Jesus's work of forming God's people through the proclamation of the gospel will continue despite opposition.

CONTEXT

This passage brings to a close the first main section of the book with the summary statement on 6:7 - 'So the word of God spread' (cf. >9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, 28:31). It had begun with Jesus' commission to the apostles to be his witnesses 'in Jerusalem' (1:8) and finishes with their having 'filled Jerusalem' with their teaching (6:28). Their message will soon spread further afield (cf. 8:1ff) - to 'all Judea and Samaria' (cf.9:32- 12:24) and the 'ends of the earth' (12:25-28:31).

SUMMARY

- 5:12-17 Responses to the Gospel vary but ...
- 5:18-32 ...opposition to Gospel proclamation is pointless as Jesus is at work
- 6:1-7 The priority of gospel proclamation

RESPONSES TO THE GOSPEL (5:12-17)

The prayer of 4:29-30 was answered. In defiance of the authorities (4:18) they continue the job they had been given and God continues to vindicate their message (5:12, 15-16, cf. 2:22).

Differing responses are evoked.

- i. The believers continue and meet together at the temple (12b, cf. 2:26, 3:11)
- ii. Some Jews respond in repentance and faith (14)
- iii. Others shy away (13).
- iv. The Sadducees are filled with jealousy and continue oppose the apostles (17).

The original healing of the beggar (and the teaching that accompanied it) that had initially aroused their opposition is being repeated over and over again. Crowds continued to gather and Jerusalem 'is filled' with the apostolic message (28).

OPPOSITION TO GOSPEL PROCLAMATION IS POINTLESS (5:17-39)

The apostles have refused to disobey God (4:19) and once again face the wrath of the Sadducees (18). Their miraculous escape from jail not only vindicates their actions but is also a vivid demonstration of the unstoppable nature of God's purposes (39) as God commands them to 'stand firm' (20) in their proclamation in the temple courts. (The 'angel of the Lord' is the Greek term for the Hebrew "Angel of YHWH" which denoted God himself in his dealing with humankind).

In the events that follow, the Pharisees have a moderating influence on the Sadducees (34ff). This can in part be explained by their different theological position:

The Sadducees They looked back to the Maccabean revolt of 168 BC (of the Jews against their Syrian oppressors) as having inaugurated the Messianic age and thus rejected any hopes for God's further heavenly intervention in a coming Messiah since they considered the Messianic age to have begun already. For them the Messiah was an ideal, not a person and the Messianic age was already over 100 yrs old.

The Pharisees They devoted themselves to the study of the Books of Moses (Gen to Deut) and expounding them with contemporary relevance. They looked forward to the Messianic age and a personal Messiah, and had a definite (if sub-NT) belief in the resurrection of the dead. Thus for them the Jerusalem Christians lay within the scope of Judaism and were thus not to be treated as heretics. (However this tolerance will not last long as it will soon become clear to everyone that Christianity could not and would not be contained within Judaism (cf. ch 7:ff, 8:1:).

The apostles are held to be in contempt of court. They had been ordered not to teach in the 'name off Jesus' (4:18) but had

persisted in so doing. They hadn't changed their message to take account of the authorities sensibilities (28), and nor do they do so now (30f). Peter as spokesman for the apostles proclaims the crucified, risen and now glorified Jesus as the saviour of Israel able to give repentance and forgiveness- even to those who killed him (30). It is not the apostles obstinacy but the offence of their message about Jesus that so enraged the Sanhedrin that they wanted their death.

... BECAUSE JESUS IS AT WORK (5:31)

Once again the glorified Christ is portrayed as being active. In his gospel Luke 'wrote about all that Jesus began to do' (Acts 1:8). Acts is his record of what the ascended Christ continued to do (cf. 2:33, 3:12b-13, 16, 4:10 etc). Jesus is the now ascended and glorified king who saves his people (5:31) and this work continues afresh as Gamaliel's advice is taken and the apostles are released (42).

Throughout the last few chapters the idea of Jesus 'name' has included not just to who Jesus is but also what he does (Cf. 3:6,16; 4:7,10,12,17,18,30). This common biblical idea can be seen clearly in Exodus 6:2-7 where God, in revealing His name - YHWH - to Moses explains what this means both in terms of who he is (the covenant God of Abraham - 6:2) and what he does (saves his people - 6:6-8). Hence Luke can summarise suffering disgrace for the sake of Christ and his gospel as suffering disgrace 'for the Name' (v41) something that the apostles regarded as a privilege.

THE PRIORITY OF GOSPEL PROCLAMATION (6:1-7)

This section looks both backward and forward. It brings to a close the first section of the book (1:1-6:7) with the summary statement 'So the word of God spread' and, with the introduction of Stephen and Philip (6:5), anticipates the next phase in gospel expansion in which they will both have central roles (6:8-8:1 and 8:4-40).

LOOKING BACK ...

The message of the crucified Messiah, now ascended and glorified, who is able to give repentance and forgiveness has been proclaimed. The apostles have 'filled Jerusalem' (5:28) with their teaching and a community of believers has been established (6:7).

However to date their teaching has centred on the temple (2:46; 3:1; 5:12,20,42) and their hearers have been Jews. The gospel has been proclaimed as fulfilment of Jewish Messianic expectation. For those with 'eyes to see and ears to hear' there have been hints that the gospel is available to all people groups (eg. 2:21,39) but this has not been a main feature of the preaching - and indeed at this stage the apostles had yet to take on board that this meant the Gentiles as well (cf.10:1-11:18). So much was this the case that the Pharisees could tolerate their teaching as an acceptable sect within Judaism (5:35-39). Nevertheless the apostles have been faithful to their allotted task (1:8a) and the 'word of God' had spread.

LOOKING FORWARD ...

These verses anticipate a number of future developments:

- i. The future witness of Stephen and Philip.
- ii. Tensions within the early church between Jew and Gentile - although here the differences between the two groups are more subtle, since everyone involved is Jewish. The complaint here is between two groups of Jews. The Grecian - perhaps those returned to Jerusalem from the Diaspora - who were influenced by and identified with certain Greek patterns of thought and the Hebraic - possibly those who had never left Jerusalem - who were passionately 'Jewish Jews'.
- iii. The apostolic priority of teaching and prayer

IMPLICATIONS

1. What do these verses tell us about
What influence should this have, if any, on ours?
 - i. God's priority
 - ii. The apostles priority?
2. Summarise the gospel as Peter proclaims it in the first 6 chapters of Acts?
How does this compare with the one we carry around in our heads?

Acts 6:8-8:3

AIM

- To place my confidence in Jesus rather than resisting the Holy Spirit by trusting in customs and structures

CONTEXT

The big context is the whole of Luke's two volume work (Gospel and Acts). His stated purpose for the two volumes is found in Luke 1:4 - "...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

The more immediate context is the earlier chapter of Acts. We have seen that Acts is an account of the continuing ministry of the ascended Jesus through the apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit (chapter 1). The task of the apostles is to be witnesses to Jesus to the ends of the earth (1:8) and the narrative up until 6:8 has been concerned with their witnessing in Jerusalem. We have seen a pattern emerge where the apostles preach, the church grows but persecution from the Jewish leaders grows too (eg. 4:1-4). 6:7 was a summary of the whole of the first 5 chapters, "So the word of God spread".

Acts 6:8-8:3 fits into this general pattern. Stephen witnesses concerning Jesus and persecution breaks out against him and the church (8:1). However, it results in the scattered church continuing to spread the gospel (8:4). This section also marks the end of the exclusive focus on Jerusalem. Luke uses this first martyrdom at the hands of the Sanhedrin as a watershed in the spread of the gospel. From here on in Acts, whilst Jerusalem is not ignored, Luke's attention moves to the growth of the church in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The introduction of Saul (Paul) at 7:58 is therefore significant.

SUMMARY

6:8-15	The Charge of Blasphemy
7:1-53	The Defence of Orthodoxy
7:54-8:3	The Sentence of Death

1. THE CHARGE OF BLASPHEMY (6:8-15)

Luke establishes Stephen's credentials for us in v.8. He wants us to know that Stephen is a man who will bear a true and accurate witness to Jesus and concerning the Jews. He too is a man accredited by God (cf 2:22, 43). It is significant that opposition arises from within the Synagogue of the Freedmen (v.9) because these are Jews who originate outside of Jerusalem. Once again Luke is beginning to turn our attention to the ends of the earth.

The central charge against Stephen is blasphemy (v.11), blasphemy against God (he is accused of speaking against the holy place saying that Jesus will destroy it) and blasphemy against Moses (he is accused of speaking against the law saying that Jesus will change the customs handed down by Moses). Clearly, these two charges cut to the heart of Jewish religion - the temple and the Law were the two great foundations of Jewish practice.

But, notice Luke tells us that the charges were false (v.11-12). Stephen will demonstrate in his defence that it is the Jews who have blasphemed against God and Moses throughout their history. In contrast he, in following Jesus, is in step with God's purposes throughout the history of Israel.

2. THE DEFENCE OF ORTHODOXY (7:1-53)

GOD WAS NEVER RESTRICTED TO A HOLY PLACE 1-34

At first this may appear to be an aimless wander through the history of Israel's patriarchs and Moses. However, Stephen is constantly giving us geographical details. Look where the patriarchs and Moses found themselves. Abraham: Mesopotamia (where the God of glory appears to him v.2), Haran (v.2) and even when he reached the promised land he did not possess any of it (v.5). Indeed God tells him that his descendants will be enslaved in a foreign land (v.6). Joseph finds himself in Egypt (but God is with him v.9) and God increases the number of his people in Egypt in order to fulfil his promise to Abraham (v.17). Moses is born in Egypt (v.20), flees to Midian (v.29) and hears God speak to him in a burning bush (which is described as holy ground v.33) at Mount Sinai (v.30-32). The point is clear: God was with his people outside of the holy land - he was never restricted to a holy place. Stephen cannot be blaspheming against God when he says that the holy place is no longer significant because of Jesus.

ISRAEL REJECTED THE MINISTRY OF MOSES 35-43

Israel rejected Moses who God sent to be their ruler and judge (v.35). Stephen stresses that Moses told the Israelites that "God will send you a prophet like me from your own people". In other words, Stephen is telling them that Moses pointed forward to Jesus. But, v.39 the Israelites refused to obey Moses and instead chased after idols (v.39ff). Again, the

point is clear - Israel was guilty of rejecting Moses. Stephen cannot be guilty of blaspheming against Moses because he believes in the prophet who Moses pointed towards. Israel is guilty of blasphemy against Moses because they reject Jesus.

GOD NEVER LIVED IN THE TEMPLE 44-50

Stephen's main point here is clear: despite the tabernacle and the temple, "...the Most High does not live in houses made by men.". On the contrary, heaven is his throne and the earth is his footstool. The Jews in restricting him to the temple have been guilty of blasphemy against Him. Stephen cannot be guilty of blasphemy against the holy place if God does not live there.

THE APPLICATION 51-53

Stephen now drives his point home which is essentially, "You are just like your fathers. You always resist the Holy Spirit" (v.51). They killed the prophets and now you have killed the one the prophets spoke about. Far from keeping the law, you have not obeyed it because if you had you would not have killed the one to whom the law pointed (v.53). The Jews were guilty of holding onto customs and traditions whilst killing the one to whom the customs and traditions pointed.

3. THE SENTENCE OF DEATH (7:54-8:3)

The Sanhedrin are furious (v.54) because Stephen has turned the charges on them - they are the ones guilty of blasphemy against God and Moses. Stephen's vision confirms the truth he has spoken about God. God rules from heaven not from the holy place (v.55,56) and Jesus, who the Jewish leaders killed, is at the place of all authority, God's right hand (v.56). Moreover, the reaction of the Jewish leaders confirms Stephen's assessment of them. Their fathers persecuted the prophets (v.52) and now they show themselves to be 'just like their fathers' as they kill yet another prophet of God. Luke has probably been impressing Stephen's role on us since 6:8 where he performs signs and wonders (a badge of prophethood in the OT). He has also described him as 'full of God's grace and power' (6:8), as possessing powerful wisdom (6:10), as having a face of an angel (6:15) and as being "full of the Holy Spirit" (7:55). The words of Stephen in verse 59 seem to echo the words of Jesus on the cross (cf Luke 23:34, 46) and again seem to be designed to confirm him as a faithful witness and follower of Jesus.

IMPLICATIONS

How does this section enable us 'to know the certainty of the things we have been taught?'

How does this episode add to our understanding of the spread of the church in the 1st century and now?

In what specific way does the church today fall into the same mistake as the Jews? How should we deal with that?

In what specific ways might we at St Helens' or as individuals fall into the same mistake as the Jews? How should we avoid that?

Acts 9:1-31

AIM

- To have greater confidence in Paul and his ministry.
- To see that the taking of the gospel to the Gentiles and the opposition that it faced was all part of God's purposes.

CONTEXT

The apostles have continued to witness in obedience to Jesus' commission of 1:8, and God's grace has been seen to extend to the Samaritans (8:11).

This next passage marks the end of a section begun at 6:8. It has seen

the gospel spread out of it's Jewish enclave (8:1) and become established in Samaria (9:31) despite opposition from both within and without.

Having established that to stick with Judaism is to reject the Jewish Messiah (7:51-53) and that God's people include not only Jews but also Samaritans(8:4-25) the stage is set for further expansion to the Gentiles.

SUMMARY

9:1-19 Paul accredited by God

9:19-30 Paul's ministry recognised by the apostles

PAUL ACCREDITED BY GOD (9:1-18)

PAUL'S RADICALISM NO ABERRATION

Saul's 'Damascus road experience' is perhaps one of the most well known parts of the New Testament, the phrase itself entering the language. But how closely should we identify with it; what does Luke want to teach us by it?

Where Acts records other conversions there is by now a familiar pattern. The gospel is taught, there is often a call to repentance and faith followed by the baptism of those who believe. There is no such pattern here and it is difficult to analyse these events through that grid. Indeed the details of Paul's experience are unique in Acts - which is exactly the point!

Luke's focus is not primarily:

- on Paul
- or his conversion

but on God who is seen through these extraordinary events to be establishing Paul as his agent to take the gospel beyond 'Judea, Galilee and Samaria' (31 , cf 15-16).

His overriding concern is to establish beyond any doubt the authority of Paul and the authenticity of his message - and in particular the validity of his taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

This is evident from:

i. God's view of the events. His words to Ananias (15-16) - within the context of Ananias's doubts (13-14) - bears witness that Paul's ministry was no aberration or accident but part of His plan to take the gospel to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

ii. The acceptance by the other apostles of Paul's ministry. This is at least in part due to Paul's encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road (26-28).

iii. The fact that Luke will return to these events again (22:1-21 & 26:9-23). On both occasions it is within the context of Paul having to defend his ministry; and it is on both occasions it is the taking of the gospel to the Gentiles that causes most offence (cf 22:21-22, 26:23-24).

iv. The rest of the NT. In his letters Paul is often driven to defend his ministry. He returns to his Damascus road experience to emphasise that the gospel he proclaimed and his ministry - in particular his ministry to the Gentiles - was no aberration or human invention, but a revelation from Christ himself (17, 27 cf eg Gal 1:11-24; 1 Cor 15:1-11).

THE SHOCK OF PAUL'S RADICALISM

If the news that to be an orthodox Jew meant embracing Jesus and leaving the temple and Mosaic covenant behind - and it did (7:54ff) - the fact that God's purposes involved the Gentiles would have seemed even more radical.

Throughout Acts we will see Paul, on arriving in a new place, go at first to the synagogue (14:1, 17:1 etc). He had a passion for the conversion of the Jews (cf Romans 9:1). God was still concerned for them (Paul himself was Jewish!) and they were not excluded from his ministry (15).

However the distinguishing mark of his ministry that marks him out from the other apostles is the taking of the gospel to the Gentiles (cf. Rom 1:5) and it was this emphasis - the universal applicability of the gospel - that always got him into trouble 22:21-22, 26:23-24).

Although the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God was there in the OT had been explicit in all that the other apostles had been saying (cf. eg 2:21), and is perhaps no surprise to us with our 'post-Paul', global view of the world, it was deeply shocking to those in the first century schooled in Judaism. Even the other apostles have yet to take it fully on board (cf ch 10-11, esp 11:18: 'even the Gentiles') and the relationship between Jew and Gentiles - and of them both to the Mosaic covenant - is a recurring theme not only in Acts, but in many other parts of the NT (cf. Romans, Galatians, Ephesians).

If Theophilus was to be convinced of the things that he had been taught (Luke 1:3-4) he would need to know with certainty that Paul was 'God's man with God's message'. Now that the gospel has become established in Judea and Samaria (9:31) and before Luke moves on to his account of the taking of the gospel to 'the ends of the earth' (1:8) he establishes the authority of Paul.

Paul's ministry amongst the Gentiles will be characterised by his insistence that you don't have to follow the Mosaic covenant to be Christian.

Stephen's speech together with the Paul's 'Damascus road experience' are used by Luke to establish two crucial truths:

- that the gospel is for all people and
- that to be a follower of Jesus does not mean becoming Jewish

he does this just prior to his telling of the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles (ch 10ff)

APOSTOLIC RECOGNITION OF PAUL'S MESSAGE (20-31)

As the great persecutor of the early church becomes the persecuted in fulfilment of God's purposes for him (9:1 & 9:23, 29. cf. 9:14) Paul begins to proclaim Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (20, 22). He preaches fearlessly in the 'name of Jesus' (27) just as Peter and the other disciples had done (2:21, 38, 3:16, 4:10, 12 etc.), is accepted by them (28) and is opposed by those of whom he once approved (29, cf 6:9,8:1)

THINKING IT THROUGH ...

- Why was it so important that Luke establish that Paul was 'God's man'?
- How would establishing Paul's authority have given Theophilus greater confidence in the gospel?
- Where does Paul's authority come under attack today?

How do we undermine Paul's authority in
i) our evangelism & ii) our lifestyles?

What encouragement can we have from renewed confidence in Paul?

Acts 9:32-11:18

AIM

- To be convinced of the equality of Jew and Gentile before God.

CONTEXT

These verses occupy a key place within 6:7-12:25. Up to 6:7 the gospel has been directed at Jews, and Jerusalem has become 'filled' with the gospel (5:28, 6:7). From 13:1 onwards it will be taken intentionally to the Gentiles as Paul and Barnabas are sent out on their first missionary journey.

All the events in between - Stephens's speech, the call and authentication of Paul and Peter's exploits - serve to challenge the notion that the gospel is only for Jews, and convince both the apostles and the wider church of the validity of taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

SUMMARY

9:32-42 Peter's authority affirmed

10:1-11:18 Gentile inclusion confirmed.

Luke's punch line is 11:18 - 'So then, God has granted *even* the Gentiles repentance unto life'. In getting there he looks at three groups - Peter; Cornelius and his household; and the other Jewish Christians and shows how God works to turn their understanding upside down.

God's activity is seen throughout these verses - healing (9:34), speaking (10:3-4, 13-16, 20, 31; 11:7 etc), sending visions and interpreting them (10:11ff, 28), giving / baptising with the Holy Spirit (10:44-47, 11:15-17), and generally moving the action on (10:20) - finally convincing Peter and the 'circumcised believers' (11:2) that God's salvation extended to the Gentiles

PETER: THE APOSTLE TO... *THE GENTILES!*

Just as Luke has been keen to emphasise that there is no difference between Paul's message and Jesus's message (9:15) he now emphasises that there is no difference between Peter and Paul's gospel by:

- i. Underlining the fact that *Peter* is the one who first preaches the gospel to the Gentiles (10:34-11:18)
- ii. Showing that all that Jesus had done began to do and teach (1:1, cf Luke 5:17-26, 8:51-56) he continues to do through his apostles - Peter (9:36-42) & Paul (20:9-12).

PETER IS CONVINCED

The repetition of the vision - both in fact (10:16) and in Luke's account (10:9-17, 11:4-10) emphasises its importance: it is instrumental in turning Peter's understanding, and that of the fledgling church, up-side down.

Associating with a Gentile would have made any devout Jew 'unclean' (10:28) - and accepting hospitality from them (10:23) was considered particularly beyond the pale. However Peter's understanding of the command to eat both 'clean' and 'unclean' food (cf. Lev 11) is that he should no longer consider 'any man impure or unclean' (10:28).

His own vision, Cornelius' vision, the command to go to Joppa (10:20) and the unfolding events have convinced him that God does not show favouritism & that the gospel is for 'everyone who believes' (10:43). As a result the gospel is preached to an explicitly Gentile audience for the first time (10:36-43).

CORNELIUS IS CONVINCED

Although a Gentile, Cornelius is not like the out-and-out pagans who Paul will address in Acts 17.

His family / household are:

- 'devout & God fearing' (10:2, cf. 10:7)

He is:

- a 'righteous and God-fearing man' (10:27)
- who prays regularly (10:2)
- is generous to the poor (10:2, 4, 30).
- is respected by the Jews (10:22)

and

- who was waiting to hear a message of salvation (10:22,11:13-14)

Given that Peter begins his sermon by reminding his audience of what they had already heard - of John's baptism and Jesus' earthly ministry - it is possible that Cornelius had responded to John's message (Luke 3:7ff 'produce fruit in keeping with repentance... the man who has two tunics should share with him who has none ...') and heard something of Christ's teaching, but had yet to hear of his death and resurrection (cf. 19:1-7) - to which Peter then turns.

The now familiar emphasis of Peter's sermons in Acts are once again present - they killed him; God raised him; we saw him; the OT bears witness to him; forgiveness is available through him. Cornelius and his household hear and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (11:17).

THE JEWISH CHRISTIANS ARE CONVINCED

The giving of the Holy Spirit to Gentiles astonishes Peter's Jewish companions (10:45) and he is criticised by his fellow Christians back in Jerusalem for going to Gentiles (11:2). It is this coming of the Holy Spirit, accompanied by the 'speaking in tongues' (10:46), that finally convinces them that forgiveness and new life was for Gentiles too (10:47, 11:17-18).

As:

- the events of the day of Pentecost had born witness to the fact that God had initiated the final stage of salvation history, saving a people from amongst the Jews for himself,
- the events of 8:14-17 had born witness that God's mercy extended to the Samaritans
- so now this 'mini-pentcost' (11:15, 17) bore witness to the fact that salvation was for the Gentiles too. They were not to be 'second class citizens' (as in the days of the Temple when they could only enter the most outer court) for they had recieved the same gift as their Jewish brothers (11:17, cf Eph 3:6).

THINKING IT THROUGH

- Why is it important for Luke to establish that 'God does not show favouritism'?
- What relevance was this... to Peter ?... to the Jerusalem church?... to Theophilus?
- What relevance is it to us today?

Acts 11:19-12:24

AIMS

- * To give thanks for the one new community God has created out of Jews and Gentiles
- * To see God's continued concern for the Jewish church.

CONTEXT

The agenda of 1:8 is continuing to be worked out. Chapters 1-7 have focussed on Jerusalem and Judea, chapter 8 has recorded the spread of the Gospel to Samaria, chapter 9 has prepared us for the mission to the Gentiles (9:15).

Chapters 9-11:18 have recounted the climactic events leading to and following from the conversion of the first Gentiles. Peter's authority has been reaffirmed (9:32-43) and the reality that God does not show favouritism (10:34) has been worked out in the conversion of Cornelius and his household (10:45). Once again the apostles and Jewish believers in Jerusalem have confirmed that this is a genuine work of God (11:1-18 cf 8:14ff, 9:28-29).

The full blown mission to the Gentiles will begin in chapter 13. Hence, the purpose of 11:19-12:25 seems to be twofold. First, to describe the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church and secondly to remind us that God is still concerned for the Jerusalem church even as the Gospel is about to spread.

SUMMARY

- 11:19-30 The unity of God's new community
- 12:1-24 The preservation of God's original community

THE UNITY OF GOD'S NEW COMMUNITY (11:19-30)

Verse 19 refers us back to 8:1 where we are told that believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria because of the persecution which broke out after Stephen's martyrdom. This tells us that we are still in the Samaria/Judea phase of Acts 1:8 even though Gentiles are beginning to believe.

Verses 19-20 give us the parallel mission of these scattered believers - some preach only to Jews (19), others speak to Greeks (20). The net result was that 'the Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.' (21). Luke seems to be pressing home the point that God does not show favouritism - both Jews and Gentiles believe as they hear the Gospel.

Once again the Jerusalem church is intrigued by the events in Antioch (22). This is understandable because this is the first 'mixed' Jew/Gentile gathering. Notice that when Barnabas arrives he sees the 'evidence of the grace of God' (23) which we presume is a mixed group of people who believe in Jesus. Barnabas gets Saul because he knows that Saul has been given a particular mandate '...to carry [God's] name before the Gentiles...and before the people of Israel' (9:15). Therefore, Saul is uniquely placed to establish this new community in the Gospel. In fact so effective is Saul and Barnabas's teaching that 'the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.' (26). Far from being a useful answer to a Christian trivia question, Luke's comment is designed to show us that the Gospel is breaking down the Jew/Gentile divide - there are no longer Jews and Gentiles in the church, just Christians.

Verses 27-30 immediately give us a practical outworking of the new found unity of the church. The prophets in Jerusalem inform the Antiochan Christians that a severe famine is coming. The Christians respond by providing help for the brothers in Judea. Luke is wanting to impress on us not only the unity of the church within Antioch (19-26) but also the unity between the church in Antioch and the church in Jerusalem. This unity is created by the Gospel and is expressed in concrete ways.

Notice throughout the section Luke is concerned about numbers (21, 24, 26). He probably wants us to grasp the amazing impact the Gospel has in this mixed community. This is no minor event.

THE PRESERVATION OF GOD'S ORIGINAL COMMUNITY (12:1-24)

The main theme of the section is God's sovereign preservation and care of the Jerusalem church. The central characters are Herod, who persecutes the Jerusalem church (1-4) and Peter, who leads the Jerusalem church. The section begins with the apparent triumph of Herod over the church as he kills James and imprisons Peter but ends with the triumph of

God as he frees Peter and judges Herod. The end result is that once again, ‘...the word of God continued to increase and spread.’ God has the last word not human tyrants.

However, it is important to notice that God’s sovereign care does not always mean instant deliverance. James, the brother of John, is killed by Herod (2) and Peter is imprisoned. God does things in his way.

Notice too that it is God who both delivers and judges. The ‘angel of the Lord’ figure is central to both parts of the story (7-10, 23) delivering Peter and killing Herod. The angel of the Lord is an Old Testament character who usually stands for God himself as he comes to deal with human beings (eg Ex 3:2ff where the angel of the Lord appears to be synonymous with God). Peter’s deliverance comes in response to the prayers of God’s people (5).

However, perhaps most significantly, is the positioning of these accounts in Luke’s overall narrative. Chapter 12:24 marks the end of the third main section of Acts (6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, 28:31). We must ask why does Luke record these incidents here? It seems the answer is that he wants to give Theophilus certainty that even though the church is becoming increasingly mixed (11:19-30) and even though the Gentile mission is about to move into top gear (13-28), God has not forgotten the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. He continues to care for them and deliver them.

Don’t miss the humour in Luke’s account of Peter’s release (11-16). There is a deliberate element of farce in the recounting of the interaction of Peter, Rhoda and the other believers. You can imagine the Jerusalem believers laughing every time this story was read! Maybe, Luke’s intent was to demonstrate God’s deep love and delight in the church (speculative but interesting!)

THINKING IT THROUGH....

Why was it important for Theophilus to be certain about the ‘mixed’ nature of the church?

Why is it important for us to grasp it too?

In what ways are we tempted to deny it in practice?

In what ways can we affirm it in practice?

Why was it important for Theophilus to be certain about God’s sovereign care for the Jewish church?

Why is it important for us to be certain of it too?

In what ways are we tempted to deny it in practice as we relate to Jewish Christians? In what

ways can we affirm it in practice as we relate to Jewish Christians?

Acts 13-14

AIM

- To see that in the proclamation of the gospel the ascended Jesus achieves his purpose of forming his people from amongst Jew and Gentile.
- To see that opposition to the gospel is both inevitable and ultimately futile.

CONTEXT

Although Luke will return to Jerusalem later on in his account (cf ch 15 & ch 21ff) the focus now shifts from ‘Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria’ to ‘the ends of the earth (1:8); from Peter (and the Jerusalem apostles) to Paul; from mission to the Jews to mission to the Gentiles.

This division is not absolute. Indeed Paul will make a habit of going first to the synagogue whenever he arrives in a new place (13:5, 13:14, 14:1) only going to the Gentiles once his message is rejected (14:46). Nevertheless the movement from this point in Acts is from Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish world to Rome, the centre of the known (pagan) world:

from Jerusalem to 'the ends of the earth' (1:8).

STRUCTURE

Chapters 13 and 14 tell of Paul's first missionary journey. He is sent out from Antioch with Barnabas [and, for a while, John Mark (13:5, 13 cf 15:37) in 13:2 and returns there in 14:26 having completed the work that God had given him to do (14:26).

These chapters contains two sermons

- To a predominantly Jewish audience (13:16-41)
- To a pagan audience (14:15-19)

and the narrative both expands and illustrates the sermon content.

THE WORD OF GOD

Paul's commission had been 'to carry (Christ's) name before the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel (9:15) and it is this that he now proceeds to do.

The message that he proclaimed is variously described as 'the word of God' (13:5,7,46,48,49), 'the word of the Lord' (13:44, 49), 'the teaching about the Lord' (13:12), 'the good news' (14:7, 14:21), or simply 'the word' (14:25). This word of God is a word about God, revealing all that He has done for his people (cf 13:16-41).

AN EFFECTIVE WORD ...

Throughout these chapters God is seen as active. He appointed Paul and Barnabas to their task (13:2), sent them on their way (13:4) and achieved all that he had determined to achieve through their work (13:48, 14:26).

When God's word about Jesus is proclaimed there are two responses - acceptance and rejection. And they occur, together:

And Jews and Gentiles are to be found in both camps:

Jews accept	13:43, 14:1
Gentiles accept	13:43, 48; 14:1, 4.
Jews reject	13:6ff, 45-46, 50; 14:2, 5, 19.
Gentiles reject	13:11; 14:2, 4, 5, 19.

Though many refuse to believe (14:2) God is nevertheless at work (14:26-27) through Paul and Barnabas (13:2), appointing both Jews and Gentiles to eternal life (13:48). He does so in the midst of opposition. The same message that saves some condemns others(13:46-48).

... ABOUT JESUS

Luke draws many parallels in these chapters between events in the ministry of Paul and of Peter (cf. 13:6-11 and 8:18-24 / 14:8-10 and 3:2-8). At least as striking is the similarity between the content of Paul's first recorded sermon and those of Peter and Stephen (all of which were addressed to Jewish audiences) with the common themes of salvation history, and promise and fulfilment:

- As in Stephen's speech the review of Israel's history serves the purpose of introducing 'the Saviour Jesus' (13:23).
- As in Peter's Pentecost sermon Paul's focus is on Jesus' resurrection / ascension, which is seen as the climax of salvation history. For *in raising him from the dead* God fulfilled everything that He had promised (13:30-33).

Jesus' resurrection :

- Demonstrates that He is the Son of God promised to David (from 2 Sam 7:10-14, alluded to in 13:23), the sovereign ruler of Psalm 2 before whom all earthly powers are as nought (13:32-33).
- Shows that all those things promised to David - the establishment of God's people under the everlasting rule of the God's King (v34) - is available 'to us' (13:32).

- Means that forgiveness is now proclaimed. Those who trust in him are made righteous - something that could never be obtained by observance of the Mosaic law (13:39). The promise of forgiveness comes with a warning to those who would scoff and refuse to believe. God will not tolerate rebellion forever. Judgment is coming (13:40-41, cf Hab 1:5ff; 13:51 cf. Luke 9:5).

... COMMUNICATED TO BE UNDERSTOOD

One of the most noticeable things about Paul's preaching in these chapters is his different apologetic to different audiences.

In front of a Jewish audience (or at least one well versed in Judaism (13:16) he starts with the OT and explains how Jesus' resurrection fulfils all OT hopes: 'Jesus is the Christ'.

In front of a pagan audience he starts with God as the loving creator of the world who has not left himself without testimony (14:15-17). The demand that the crowd 'turn from their worthless idols to the living God' is based on the character of God and the fact that, with the coming of Christ, (14:16) things have now changed . (We will see this approach developed further in Acts 17.)

AGAINST WHICH OPPOSITION IS FUTILE

Paul's message generates both faith and opposition (see above). However the opposition always fails to impede the spread of the gospel. Indeed it is often the proximate cause of it's spread (13:46, 51: 14:6, 19-21).

Although faithfulness to the gospel will inevitably result in hardship (14:22) all opposition is ultimately futile for the crucified Jesus is now the resurrected and enthroned king against whom all opposition is not only pointless, but laughable (13:33, cf Ps 21-6).

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How would Theophilus have been encouraged by hearing of Paul's first missionary journey? How would Paul have given him greater assurance in the gospel?
- How is this relevant to us today?

ACTS 15 - 16:5

AIM

After seeing the progress of the gospel to the ends of the earth, the essential nature of the message is examined - salvation is by grace alone is the resounding conclusion. There are no conditions on salvation. God makes no distinction between people for 'He purified their hearts by faith' (5:9). We also see practical measures being taken by the Church to ensure the progress of the gospel is not impeded in the future.

CONTEXT

After 14 chapters, we have seen much progress in the carrying out of the 1:8 commission. The gospel has gone out to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Beginning with Cornelius, Gentiles have been entering the Church. By chaps 13 and 14, the Gentile mission was gathering great momentum despite opposition. Paul and Barnabas had reported to the Church at Antioch all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles - 14:27.

There were however practical difficulties facing the Gentile believers -15:19, 24. Those known as Judaisers were Jewish

Christians who wanted the Gentile believers to take on the Jewish law when accepting Christ. By insisting on this legalism, they were ultimately challenging and denying the gospel. Their stance denied the fact that justification came through faith in Christ alone.

Paul and Barnabas are found in Antioch following their great missionary journey but they return to Jerusalem after this challenge arises. The way of salvation is at stake, the gospel is in dispute. 'Are there conditions on salvation?' is the fundamental issue.

What takes place at the Council is dramatic and of vital significance to the future. The gospel is freed from entanglement with Jewish law and institutions. This decision is made despite the risk of alienation from within the Jerusalem church.

STRUCTURE

THE CHALLENGE (15:1-5)

Visitors from Judea submit to the church at Antioch that Gentile believers need the Mosaic law. The Judaisers, as they were known, were effectively a pressure group challenging the legitimacy of the mission to the Gentiles and the validity of their conversion. They were not necessarily opposed to Gentile mission per se but they considered that these believers must take on obedience to the law, including circumcision. These were therefore akin to conditions for salvation in their eyes. Paul and Barnabas set off to discuss the issue with the Jerusalem Church and use even this journey as an excuse for encouraging others.

A THEOLOGY OF GRACE (15:6-18)

The debate opens up again as soon as they arrive. There are contributions to the debate reported by Luke from Peter, then Paul and Barnabas (v.12 - although this seems more an account of the work in which they have been involved than a theological input), and from James.

The doctrinal basis is set out by Peter first of all - God makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile. Rather He purifies their hearts by faith (15:9). Peter reminds them that God showed He accepted the Gentiles by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He had to the Jews. Why are the Judaisers testing God? The burden that they are putting on the Gentiles by seeking to subject them to the law is an impossible hurdle which the Jews themselves have never been able to bear. This argument strongly echoes Paul's speech at 13:39 and we see the two united in their view.

James pursues the idea and explains that this has always been part of God's plan. In Amos 9:11-2, God's future purpose is revealed as restoring Israel and gathering in the Gentile believers. The inclusion of the Gentiles is not an after thought but was foretold. These believers now form part of the true Israel.

A MESSAGE OF ENCOURAGEMENT (15:19-29)

In addition to affirming the theological position, James goes on to consider the practicalities. While urging the Council to look at the theological necessity of circumcision and reject it, he appreciates there is a need for the Gentile believers to abstain from certain practices for the sake of their Jewish believing brethren.

He identifies a number of practices that would be repugnant to the Jewish believers in v20 and 29. While not wishing to make things difficult for the Gentiles turning to God (v.19), he proposes writing to the Gentiles for the reason stated in v.21 - 'for Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.' For the sake of the Jews, the Gentile believers should limit their freedom. The letter that follows is in line with chap 14 of Paul's letter to the Romans.

The boldness of the Council should not be underestimated. While still attempting to minister to their own nation, they have made a decision that refused to see the gospel mission to the Gentiles impeded, despite the problems this might create at home. They recognise all that Christ has done and know this message must go out.

THREE ACCOUNTS OF STRENGTHENING (15:30 - 16:5)

Three episodes follow which not only further the narrative but also pick up on the theme of 'weaker' brothers being strengthened. First, in v30-5, Paul and Barnabas along with representatives from the Jerusalem Church go to Antioch and strengthen and encourage the Church there, reading the letter to them.

Next, despite the fact that Paul and Barnabas fall out over whether or not to take Mark with them - Mark may have raised initial doubts over Paul's missionary activities - God secures a double harvest with the outreach of the gospel spreading to even further.

Finally, we see Timothy being circumcised in order to make his ministry acceptable to the Jews. Due to his Jewish mother, Timothy would have been considered a Jew in the eyes of the Jewish world. His circumcision does not indicate any inconsistency in Paul's views but quite the opposite - he has a deep concern for the gospel and that barriers to belief be overcome.

THINKING IT THROUGH

Do we impose any conditions on our idea of salvation? If so, why and how?
Can we learn from the decision of the Jerusalem Council?

Do we accept what was achieved at the Cross as sufficient? Do we acknowledge that Christ's redeeming work is all that we or others need, or do we fail to accept this fully in our daily words or actions?

How seriously do we take the need not to cause offence to other believers?

Are we prepared to limit our freedom for the sake of others, both believers and non-believers?

What makes this difficult?

What lessons do we learn from the Council's actions?

ACTS 15:36-17:10

- To understand the significance of the Jerusalem Council's decision as God takes the gospel to Europe.

AIM

CONTEXT

Fundamental insights into the nature of the gospel and thus of the church have been confirmed by the Council of Jerusalem:

i. The place of adherence to the Sinai laws have been clarified (they are only of cultural significance and are therefore an option rather than an obligation) and proclamation of the gospel has been 'freed' from potentially dangerous cultural baggage.

For God has chosen all peoples on the same basis. Everyone is saved by grace through faith alone. Therefore you don't need to either be Jewish or become Jewish to be a member of God's people.

ii. However in areas of sensitive Jewish sensibilities non-Jewish Christians are wise to limit their freedoms in order to commend the gospel to those with more sensitive consciences.

Insisting on either keeping the Mosaic law or not keeping the Mosaic law would have denied a gospel of salvation by grace through *faith alone*.

The gospel has thus been confirmed as free from any cultural baggage as God now directs Paul (17:16-34) from areas heavily influenced by Judaism [where the good news has been proclaimed in terms Jesus being the Jewish Messiah (13:16-41)] to much more pagan lands (16:off) where, it has now been affirmed, he is free to develop a less explicitly 'Jewish' apologetic

The decision thus comes at a key point in the story. It is only perhaps a slight exaggeration to say with Rosner that '*Acts without ch 15 would be like a wedding ceremony without the crucial pronouncement. Everything that happens in ch 1-14 leads up to this high point and what follows merely traces the implications of the decision.*

STRUCTURE

15:36 -16:10 Providential direction for Paul's ministry

16:11-17:14 New culture, new churches, new charge

PROVIDENTIAL DIRECTION FOR PAUL (15:36-16:10)

God is at work and taking it to 'the ends of the earth' in ...

1. CONFIRMING THE GOSPEL

Through Paul's disagreement with Barnabas (15:37-39) the unity of purpose established by the Council is witnessed to in the final make up of Paul's party:

- Silas, a prophet (15:32), was a leader of the Jerusalem Church Jews. (15:22) that consisted mainly of
- Timothy was of mixed parentage (16:1) and from a church previously Jewish and Gentile founded by Paul (14:8ff) with mixed membership.

Together they take the decision of the council beyond those to whom it was initially addressed (16:4 cf 15:23) and work to make the agreement effective, establishing Jew / Gentile unity within the church (16:4-5). Silas, a Jew, affirms the validity of evangelising Gentiles as *Gentiles* and Timothy, though free from the constraints of the Mosaic law submits to it for the sake of the gospel (16:3). Their partnership is a living witness to the nature of gospel and of God's people as affirmed by the Jerusalem Council.

2. SPREADING THE GOSPEL

Paul's initial plan to return to strengthen the churches he had already planted (15:36) is only partially successful (15:41-16:5). God prevents him from visiting all his old haunts and directs him towards Europe (16:6-10). How he does so, and how Paul comes to his decision is not revealed - but the fact that God's hand is behind it all is clear (16:6, 7, 10: note the Trinitarian nature of these references).

NEW CULTURE, NEW CHURCH(16:11-40)

16:11 sees a change in the narrative from the third to second person as Luke joins the party for the first time (cf. 20:5 - 21:17, 27:1- 28:16). In the account that follows he emphasises the Gentile / Roman nature of the area:

- Phillipi was a Roman colony (16:12) with Roman governing authorities (16:20, 22, 35-36, 38) whose citizens seemingly saw themselves as more Roman than Greek or Macedonian (16:20).
- A synagogue could only be established when there was a quorum of ten men. Failing that local Jews and God-fearers

would gather in the open air and often by water in a place for prayer. The absence of a synagogue in Phillipi (16:13) suggests the absence of a significant Jewish community.

Paul's ministry amongst them results in the establishment of a church (16:40) that contained both God fearing Gentiles (16:14), as well as those with seemingly no background in monotheism (16:31-34). God 'opened' the 'heart' of Lydia and her household to respond to Paul's message (16:14) as well as the Roman jailer. They will go on to form the core of a new congregation (16:40).

From now on Paul will be entering increasingly alien environments (c17:16ff). He will develop a new apologetic (cf 17:16ff) as well as a new missionary strategy (cf18:11). However his message remains the same a point emphasised by Luke in his echoing of the earlier Jerusalem narrative of ch 3-5 both in linguistic parallels (eg. 16: 30 - cf 2:37 & 2:40) and in the sequence of events recorded (healing/exorcism, imprisonment and miraculous release) as well as the verbal records .

NEW CHARGE (ch16:16-17:9)

In Thessalonica Paul's synagogue preaching is concerned once again with the interpretation of the scriptures; explaining and proving how Jesus suffered and rose from the dead (17:3).It meets with some success (amongst Jews, God-fearers and Gentile women, 17:4), but also with opposition.

Opposition has occurred in both Phillipi and Thessalonica - in one case from Gentiles, in the other Jews. In the former case the motivation is financial (16:19); in the latter jealousy (17:5). However the public reason in both cases is the same - the gospel's alleged challenge to Roman rule (16:20, 17:7). They are charged with disrupting society and threatening the established order, ironically by those who are doing it themselves (16:19ff, 17:5ff!).

In each case, however, the charge is not answered (as will be the case later on when they are faced with similar accusation - cf 18:12-14, 19:30). We must await Paul's defence speeches later on in Acts for his answer.

THINKING IT THROUGH

How does Paul understand and apply the conclusions of the Council of Jerusalem? Is it primarily about Christian unity or the spread of the gospel?

What similarities / differences are there between Paul's first missionary journey and these events at the beginning of his second? What do they tell us about God and his purposes?

ACTS 17:10-18:17

AIMS

- To see God's hand protecting the gospel despite and through secular rulers.
- To see Paul adapting his presentation of the Gospel according to his audience,

CONTEXT

The Council of Jerusalem has made clear that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. The Gospel unites both Jew and Gentile in a new community. This central reality is now worked out by Paul and recorded by Luke in the rest of Acts. We left Paul in Thessalonica at the start of Acts 17 facing the charge of the Jews before the city officials that, "They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." (17:7) This marks a new theme in Acts which will become dominant as the book moves towards its climax: how will the gospel fare as it is confronted by the secular rulers? Paul is arrested in Jerusalem by the Romans (21:33) under pressure from the Jews and will have to defend himself successively to Governor Felix (24), Governor Festus and King Agrippa (25-26). The book ends with Paul under house arrest awaiting a trial before Caesar (28:16). We will see the beginnings of this process of the gospel confronting secular authorities in Acts 17-18.

These chapters are also interesting for the insight they give us into Paul's evangelistic approach. For the first time Luke records for us the substance of an address given by Paul to a totally pagan audience. Up until now he has recorded addresses to either Jews or God-fearing Gentiles who acknowledged the authority of Scripture. In Athens Paul will speak to pagan rulers in quite different terms.

STRUCTURE

17:10-15	The Gospel for Bible Believers
17:16-34	The Gospel for Pagans
18: 1-17	The Gospel for the Authorities

THE GOSPEL FOR BIBLE BELIEVERS (17:10-15)

Luke seems to include Berea as a contrast to both Thessalonica and Athens. He does so explicitly in v.11 where he tells us that the "...the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians..." because of the manner of their reception of the Gospel. The contrast with the Athenians is more implicit. The Bereans recognise the authority of Scripture (v.11b) and make it the benchmark of whether Paul is speaking the truth or not. In contrast, Paul will not explicitly appeal to the Bible in Athens. When dealing with people who accept the authority of the Bible, Paul will argue from the Bible, when they do not Paul does not. This becomes clear as we follow Paul to Athens under the force of further Jewish persecution (13).

THE GOSPEL FOR PAGANS (17:16-34)

The incident at Athens naturally falls into three parts: v.16-21 gives us the reason for Paul's address, v. 22-31 give us the content of Paul's address and v. 32-34 give us the response to Paul's address.

THE REASON v.16-21

It is important to notice that Paul's preaching at Athens flows from his great distress at the city's idolatry (16). The address which will follow in 22-31 is not some attempt to find common ground between the world's religions but rather is an extended attack on idolatry which concludes with a divine command to repent (30). Paul's approach of speaking in the marketplace as well as the synagogue brings him into contact with Epicurean (who believed in distant uninvolved gods - deism) and Stoic (who believed that god was all things - pantheists) philosophers. The preaching of the good news prompts them to take him to the Areopagus. Far from being a postgraduate seminar in philosophy, this encounter forms part of Luke's theme of the Gospel confronting secular authorities. The Areopagus was the ruling council of Athens and as such would determine whether or not Paul could carry on his ministry in the

marketplace.

THE ADDRESS V.22-31

Paul's address begins with a point of contact - the altar to an unknown god. He begins in their world, false though it is (remember Paul is greatly distressed by it), in order to draw them into his world of truth. Indeed he tells the Athenians he will now proclaim the God who has made himself known (23). Verses 24-28 build to the conclusion that God cannot be a humanly constructed image (29). God made the whole earth and gave life to all in it, he is separate from his creation (24-25 contra the Stoics); God made every nation of men and determined their times and places, he is involved in his creation (26 contra the Epicureans). God's intention was that through his creation and close sustenance of the world people would reach out and find him. It is clear that far from reaching out to the true God the Athenians have turned to idols.

What should the Athenians do? Repent (30). They could plead ignorance in the past and indeed God had been gracious to them in their ignorance (we should probably understand 30a as being specific to the Athenians since God did not so mercifully overlook the idolatrous ignorance of others). But now because of the resurrection of Jesus they have no excuse not to know that God will one day judge their idolatry.

THE RESPONSE V.32-34

The response is distinctly muted - some sneered, some are interested but only a few believe. The door appears to be closed for Paul and he leaves Athens (18:1). Some have argued from this less than overwhelming response that Paul got it wrong at Athens. "If he had just preached the Bible then things would have been different". He majored on creation and didn't mention the cross.

However, if Paul had got it wrong then we should expect Luke to tell us that this was the case. The response at Athens is typical of the response we have seen in Acts so far - rejection or belief. If Paul had not preached the gospel at Athens then how could a few believe? Moreover, Luke tells us that Paul was preaching the "good news about Jesus and the resurrection" (18) in Athens. We have seen throughout Acts that the resurrection is central to apostolic preaching (eg 2:31ff, 4:10, 10:40, 13:30ff) hence we can be sure that when Luke gives us a precis of Paul's preaching in Acts 17 he is telling us that Paul is preaching nothing less than the authentic apostolic gospel. To preach the resurrection assumes the death of Jesus.

Finally, Paul's approach makes sense given his audience. It had been entirely appropriate to argue from the fulfilment of Scripture of Jewish history for Jewish audiences. However, neither of these things would make any sense in the life of pagans who were unfamiliar with Scripture, unconvinced of its authority and did not share the same history as the Jews. Luke is giving us a snapshot of the apostle's flexibility which is consistent with the model of the Council of Jerusalem.

THE GOSPEL AND THE AUTHORITIES (18:1-17)

This section begins and ends with the exercise of Roman power. Aquila and Priscilla have been ejected from Rome along with the other Jews. Extra biblical sources tell us it was probably due to rioting in the Jewish community over Jesus. The section ends with Gallio, a respected proconsul of Achaia, in effect saying that Roman law has no problem with the existence gospel - it is a matter of internal concern to the Jewish community (15). It is important for Luke to establish this fact as increasingly Paul will have to defend himself before secular rulers. The gospel is aided through their actions (both in bringing Aquila and Priscilla to Corinth and protecting Paul in Corinth) even though they do not realise it. The focal point of the passage, v.9-10, confirms that it is God who will protect and keep Paul in Corinth through the actions of Gallio.

The central section of the passage (4-11) follows a by now familiar pattern - Jewish rejection leads to ministry among the Gentiles. Ironically, when Paul turns from the synagogue to the home of Titius Justus in v.7, the first person to believe is Crispus the synagogue ruler! Once again Luke is telling us that even though the pattern of salvation history is that the Jewish rejection of the gospel leads to blessings for the Gentiles, Jews will still believe the gospel!

THINKING IT THROUGH

- In what ways do we see the secular authorities interacting with the gospel today?
 - Does Acts 17-18 tell us anything about how we should regard them? If so then what? If not then why not?
 - What model do we use to present the gospel? Do we always use this model? If so then why?
 - In what ways do we fail to allow our audience to determine our presentation of the gospel?
 - What are the possible pitfalls/benefits of becoming flexible in our presentation of the gospel?
 - Try and imagine two very different contemporary audiences and work through as a group how you might present the gospel in different ways to them.
-

ACTS 18:18-19:20

AIM

- To see that the gospel of grace is about Jesus who has supreme authority

CONTEXT

This section concludes the fifth section of Acts which began at 16:6 (note the by now familiar end of section summary in 19:20). We have seen that this portion of Acts is concerned with working out the implications of the Council of Jerusalem's assertion that, "...it is through the the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved..." (15:11). Numbers of different kinds of people in different kinds of places have become Christians to demonstrate that reality (eg 16:14, 34, 17:4, 12, 34). Paul has varied his approach to gospel proclamation (17:2, 11, 22-31) in line with the flexibility introduced by the Council.

Meanwhile, we have also seen God guarding Paul and his companions as they face new charges before the secular authorities (16:20ff, 17:6-7, 18:12-17). God's sovereignty preserves them (18:10) and allows them to continue to speak his word.

Chapter 18:18-19:20 marks the climax of Paul's evangelistic activity. The final section of Acts (19:21-28:31) will focus initially on pastoral visits to existing churches and finally on Paul's defence of his ministry on the way to Rome. Little mention is made of evangelistic activity and hence there are almost no conversions mentioned (cf 28:24 for an exception). Therefore we should expect this penultimate section to say something definitive about the gospel Paul has been preaching before Luke goes on to tell us about Paul's defence of his preaching.

STRUCTURE

18:18-23	The Gospel is about Grace
18:24-19:7	The Gospel is about Jesus
19:8-20	The Gospel is about Jesus who has total authority

THE GOSPEL IS ABOUT GRACE (18:18-23)

There is some dispute about the significance of events in 18-23. It is unlikely that they are there just as a kind of travelogue telling us how Paul got from A to B (although clearly they do that). They may be there to teach us once again about the sovereignty of God in Paul's ministry (21).

However, I think the most likely construction is that we are given an account of Paul making a vow in accordance with the OT. The account of him having his hair cut off because of a vow he had taken (18) is most likely a reference to the practice of the Nazirites in Numbers 6:1-21. The hair would ultimately have to be presented for burning in the temple at Jerusalem (cf Num 6:18) hence Paul makes for the nearest port to Jerusalem, Caesarea. The language of 'he went up' and 'went down' in v.22 is seen as a common technical expression for the journey to Jerusalem. *[Some ancient texts of the Bible also have the phrase, "I must by all means keep the coming festival in Jerusalem" in v.21 as the reason why Paul declines to stay longer in Ephesus].*

If this reconstruction is the correct one then it tells us that Paul felt able to continue Jewish practices in his personal devotion to God. He knew that because the gospel was about grace (15:11) such practices were neither commanded nor forbidden rather they were 'things indifferent'.

THE GOSPEL IS ABOUT JESUS (18:24-19:7)

Luke seems to have deliberately arranged his material so that we are given parallel accounts of two sets of people who have received the baptism of John (Apollos 18:25 and 'The Ephesian 12' 19:3). It is productive to compare them.

Apollos has a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures (18:24), he had been instructed in the way of the Lord and taught about Jesus accurately (18:25). However, he knew only the baptism of John (18:25) and his understanding was inadequate (18:26). Notice, that even though Apollos only knows the baptism of John he has moved beyond John to Jesus. The consequence of his instruction by Priscilla and Aquila is that he proves, '... from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.'

In contrast, 'The Ephesian 12' have not even heard of the Holy Spirit (19:2). They do not seem to have moved beyond John to Jesus because Paul has to point them to believe in Jesus (19:4). The consequence of their instruction by Paul is that they receive the by now familiar signs of entry into the Christian life in Acts - baptism, receipt of the Holy Spirit, tongues and prophecy (cf 2:38, 8:9-17, 10:44-48).

Therefore, it seems that Apollos understood that the baptism of John pointed to Jesus (hence he was not baptised again) whereas 'The Ephesian 12' saw the baptism of John as pointing only to John. Luke in his Gospel sees John as being part of the Law and the Prophets (ie the OT era Lk 16:16) hence 'The Ephesian 12' have not moved beyond the OT to hear the good news of the kingdom of God (Lk 16:16). This is what Paul preaches to them in 19:4.

This section serves to focus us on the fact that the gospel is supremely about Jesus. Those who have trusted him, no matter how inadequate or incomplete their understanding have entered the new age of the kingdom of God. Not to have trusted him, no matter how devout and sincere, is to remain outside the kingdom. [We understand the word 'disciples' in 19:1 and Paul's assumption that they had believed in 19:1 to be descriptive of the claims that were being made by 'The Ephesian 12'. Subsequent events prove those claims to be misplaced.).

The story of 'The Ephesian 12' also completes a historical circle in Acts. The Jews have been included in the kingdom (Acts 2), the Samaritans have been included in the kingdom (Acts 8), the Gentiles have been included in the kingdom (Acts 10) and now the final historical loose end of John's disciples is tied up. They are not left hanging between the ages but are graciously included in God's purposes of salvation for the whole world. They too are included in the kingdom as they believe in Jesus. It's historical particularity of necessity makes it unrepeatable (unless you come across some John the Baptist devotees!).

THE GOSPEL IS ABOUT JESUS WHO HAS TOTAL AUTHORITY (19: 8-20)

Verses 8-10 record a familiar pattern: first to the synagogue, rejection by the Jews then to the Gentiles.

The rest of the section, even though it seems to focus on the extraordinary power of Paul, in fact draws our attention to the power of Jesus. It begins by telling us that, '**God** did extraordinary miracles through Paul...' (19:11) and ends by telling us that, "In this way the **word of the Lord** spread widely and grew in power.' (19:20).

A number of things must be noted about these events.

1. These miracles are 'extraordinary' (19:11) even by the standards of Acts.
2. They seem to be designed to demonstrate the authority of Jesus over the sorcery which was prevalent in Ephesus (cf 19:17-19) - the name of the **Lord** Jesus is held in high honour and people abandon their scrolls. The emphasis in Paul's teaching in Ephesus is on the kingdom or rule of God (19:8) which is where the book of Acts will conclude (28:31). The ascended Jesus continues his work of establishing his rule through his appointed witnesses.
3. They also function at the end of the great missionary surge to remind us that Paul is God's man (2:43 - signs and wonders as an activity of the apostles. There are also echoes in the miracles of Peter in 5:15-16, 9:32-43).

THINKING IT THROUGH

- In what ways does the fact that the Gospel is all of grace give us freedom in our practice of the Christian faith
- How do we sometimes move Jesus away from the centre of the Gospel?
- In what ways do we sometimes respond to people who have an inadequate understanding of the work of Jesus?
- In what ways should we respond to them?
- How does the fact that Jesus is Lord change our attitude to evangelism?

ACTS 19:21-20:38

AIM

- To understand the dangers facing a post-apostolic church and how they are to be faced.
- To understand the responsibilities, challenges and biblical model of leadership Paul gives the post-apostolic church.

CONTEXT

Chapter 18:18-19:20 has marked the climax of Paul's evangelistic activity. Luke has summarised the results of Paul's work in Ephesus (18:21) and although he will have more to say about his time in Ephesus (19:23-20:1) and his contact with the church there (20:17-38) his and Paul's attention now turns increasingly to Jerusalem - and beyond that to Rome (19:21, 20:16, 22ff). A major section of Luke's account is drawing to a close.

The gospel has been proclaimed throughout Eastern Europe and the Near East and has crossed all the racial, cultural and religious barriers it has encountered. It has been clearly demonstrated that the good news of salvation through Christ is for everyone (cf 2:5ff, 8:17, 11:17ff, 19:5ff), for since salvation is by grace alone it is available to all (cf 15:11).

Much of the remainder of Acts will be devoted to the accounts of Paul's defence of his all inclusive gospel and ministry: before the crowds in Jerusalem (ch 22), before Felix (ch 24) and before Festus and Agrippa (25-26).

AN ESSENTIAL DETOUR

As God's evangelistic purposes for Paul in Ephesus are accomplished ('after all this has happened' in v21 is literally 'when these things were fulfilled') he sets his face towards Jerusalem and beyond to Rome. (20:22 cf. 19:21 in RSV 'resolved in the Spirit').

However despite this he sets off in the opposite direction - to Macedonia and Achaia (Greece) - and, in line with his previous practice (15:36, 18:23) spends several months on a detour of many hundreds of miles returning to the old haunts from his 'second' missionary journey that he had yet to revisit (cf 16:8-18:18, 18:23ff). And even when he has done this he is prevented from taking the quickest route to his destination (20:3).

Why the detour? What did he yet have to do that was so important that both he and God (in his sovereignty - 20:3) delay his arrival in Jerusalem?

Fortunately Luke tells us both what he had to do (20:1, 20:7-12, 20:17-38) and how he achieved it (20:2, 7, 11).

Although he doesn't know exactly what awaits him in Jerusalem (20:22) the gist of it is clear (20:23). He knows that he will not see these congregations again (20:25). In the one address in this section in which the content of Paul's last message to a church is recorded - and the only one addressed to a Christian audience in the whole of Acts - he both encourages, warns and exhorts them to persevere in the gospel and reminds them of their responsibilities. Now his task is fulfilled the baton passes to them.

A CRUCIAL MESSAGE

In his last address to the leaders of the church in Ephesus he reviews the past and looks to the future, confident that the God who has enabled *him* to serve faithfully in the past in the face of severe testing is able to keep *them* safe despite all that awaits them (20:32).

PAUL REMINDS THEM OF HIS PAST MINISTRY

1. His motivation

All that Paul does and all he seeks to achieve is motivated by the desire to complete the job that God has given him to do (20:19, 24 cf 9:15). His desire throughout is to serve the Lord Jesus.

2. His method

He has sought to achieve his commission by teaching 'the whole will of God' (20:26). He has taught exhaustively (20:20), and exhaustingly (20:31 cf 20:7-12) in public and in private (20:20). His manner befitted the gospel that he proclaimed and the master that he served (20:18-19, 33-35). In contrast to those he warns them of (20:29-30) throughout his time with them he was concerned not for himself but for those he served.

3. His message - its content and breadth

He has aimed to teach everything that was helpful (20:20) to *both Jew & Gentile* (20:21) and has declared that *everyone* must turn to God in repentance and have faith in the Lord Jesus (20:21). This was the task that God had given him to do (9:15) and now having borne witness to the inclusive nature of the 'gospel of God's grace' (20:24, cf 11:18, 15:7-11, 13-18) he can justly say that he has proclaimed the 'whole will of God' (20:27).

4. The opposition he faced - and will face

As he had been warned (19:15) he had suffered for the sake of Christ's name (20:19) and he knows that there is still yet more to come (20:23).

PAUL WARNS THEM ABOUT THEIR FUTURE MINISTRY

Paul's legacy is not only the inclusive gospel he proclaims but also the manner in which he has proclaimed it. What the future will demand of the leaders of the Ephesian church is seen against the backdrop of Paul's past record. Borrowing from OT imagery concerning the good and bad leaders of God's people (cf. Ez 34) he reminds them of their responsibilities, aware that he will never see them again (20:25). The baton is being passed.

1. **The opposition they will face.**
As Paul had done, they too will face opposition. This will come from both within the church and from without (20:29). Opponents will attack God's people by distorting the word of truth. They must therefore stay alert and be on their guard (20:28,31).
2. **The method they must use.**
It is God's church (20:28b) and it is to God and his word that Paul commits them (20:32). By distorting it God's enemies attack the church (20:30). The implication is that they must take care to handle it correctly and like Paul never to tire from teaching and declaring the 'whole will of God'.
3. **The motivation they should have.**
The elders responsibilities, like Paul's, were God given(20:28). Christ had died for those for whom they were now responsible. These things should inform their ministry.
4. **The models they have been given.**
In his speech Paul has stressed his servant role (20:19, 34-35). As the Ephesian elders reflect on their task they are to remember what Paul said and did whilst he was with them. They were to follow his example, as he followed Christ's.
5. **The confidence they can have.**
Though the task might seem daunting they can be confident that the God who has enabled Paul to persevere through hardship to fulfil that which God had given him to do is the same God will enable them to persevere to the end (20:32).

THINKING IT THROUGH

What are the dangers that face a post-apostolic age.

How is one to recognise them?

What protection does Paul leave them?

What can we learn from Paul's ministry about how we should conduct our own?

ACTS 21:1-22:29

AIM

- To understand the nature of Christian freedom and the dangers of getting it wrong.
- To see that being a faithful Jew means becoming a Christian and how and why Paul seeks to convince his hearers that this is the case.

CONTEXT

Paul's time as a free man is nearly over. He has accepted and worked to fulfil his commission, proclaiming Christ's universal rule to all peoples and facing the opposition and has suffering that it has brought (20:26-27, cf 9:15).

He knows that he has more yet to face (19:21, 20:22). However he is determined to continue the job he has been given to do (20:24) and will continue to testify to the gospel of God's grace and its universal availability before Jewish and Gentile ruler alike (22:1ff).

STRUCTURE

- Suffering predicted and unavoidable 21:1-15
- A serious misunderstanding 22:17-21
 Paul's corrective 21:22-26
- Repeated accusations 21:27-38
 Paul's defence 21:39-22:30

SUFFERING PREDICTED BUT UNAVOIDABLE (21:1-16)

As Paul continues his journey to Jerusalem he continues his practice of visiting the local Christians (21:4, 7, 8, 16). He remains on good terms with the early disciples from Jerusalem (21:8, 16) but disagrees with them about what he should do next.

He is clear on what kind of reception is likely to await him in Jerusalem (20:22-23). Although he is unclear on the details he knows that (as with Christ) opposition, arrest and trial await. He knows however that all this was an unavoidable aspect of his ministry (9:15) and that he had to go, not least because God had told him that he must (20:22-23).

The locals agree on what would await him (21:11-13 cf 20:23) [This is so even though events will not follow literally those predicted by Agabus - for it is the Gentiles and not the Jews who will bind Paul in chains (21:33) cf. 21:11]. But they disagree on how he should respond (21:4, 12). Both they and Paul attribute their understanding to divine insight (20:22, 21:4).

How are we to understand these events. Whilst caution should be exercised in building a whole theology on one piece of narrative it is worth noting that that the prophecy here was:

- incomplete (20:22-23)
- inexact (21:11)
- and led to false conclusions (21:4)

Suffering for the cause of Christ was unavoidable. It is Paul's understanding of this (21:13) and his refusal to be swayed from his original course that finally persuades others as to what God's will is (21:14).

A SERIOUS MISUNDERSTANDING (21:17-26)

Paul is greeted warmly by the Jerusalem church and its leaders and news of what God has done through him is a cause of rejoicing (21:17-20). However all is not well.

The affirmation by the Jerusalem Council (15:1-18) that a Christian is free from the constraints of the Mosaic law - an affirmation made in response, in part at least, to the result of Paul's ministry amongst the Gentiles (15:12) - had been misunderstood. The freedom for Gentile Christians *not* to be Jewish had been interpreted as an insistence that Jewish Christians *must not* be. Many thought that Paul was insisting that they *had to* become Gentile (21:20-21). For if he was teaching that the Mosaic law could be ignored by the Gentiles because it was an irrelevance to them, did it not follow that he was teaching that the Jewish Christians *had to* ignore it to (21:21) because it was irrelevant to them too

Paul answer is a resounding no!. Christian freedom is 'double edged'.

- Gentiles are free to ignore the Mosaic law as *law*.

(Although, as Paul argues elsewhere, it still serves other purposes for them (eg cf. Rom 15:4) and when evangelising Jews it might be wise to limit that freedom (21:25 cf 15:19-21, 28-29).

- Jewish Christians are free to follow the Mosaic law (as Paul had done so recently (18:18-22))

Both are acceptable because ultimately following the constraints of the Mosaic Covenant or not following them is an irrelevance - for the gospel is a gospel of *grace* (15:8-9, 20:24). Being true to Moses is not a matter of religious observance but of serving Jesus as the Christ (cf 6:11, 51-53; and see below on 21:1-21).

How can Paul refute the allegation that he was saying that being Christian means being a 'bad' Jew? By publicly, as a Jew, joining with other Jews in temple ritual in the affirmation of a Nazarite vow (cf Nu 6:1-21, Acts 18:18-22).

REPEATED ACCUSATIONS (21:27-29)

Two accusations are levied at Paul and his gospel in this section: that his message was 'anti-state' (21:38) and that his message was 'anti-Jewish' (21:28). Neither of these are new but up until now they have gone largely unanswered:

- for 'anti-state' charge cf. 16:20, 17:7, 18:13-14
- for 'anti-Judaism' charge cf. 20:21 (although it has been implicit in much of the Jewish opposition he has faced on all his missionary journeys)

However from now until the end of the book much of Luke's account is ordered to answer these charges. He has already begun (within the context of Christian confusion) to address the 'anti-Jewish' charge. Over the remaining chapters he will do so again and again.

Luke's writes to establish Christianity as 'genuine Judaism' to:

- i. Establish it as a apolitical movement and thus no threat to the established order.
- ii. Show Paul continuing to seek to fulfil his commission in taking gospel to the Jews (9:15 cf 28:17ff).

PAUL - YOU ARE ANTI JEWISH (21:28)

The accusation of 21:28 has strong echoes of that levied against Steven (6:9, 11). The temple & law effectively defined what it meant to be God's people (Ex 19:5). If Paul is denying his Jewish heritage the charge of blasphemy would stand.

PAUL'S DEFENCE (22:1-21)

Luke clears up one accusation straight away (21:28-29 - they are mistaken in thinking he has defiled the temple by bringing a Gentile with him). But is Paul's message 'unJewish'.

Paul's answers in 22:1- 21 can be summarised as: 'I used to think it was but your God - 'the God of *our* fathers (22:14) - has shown me that it is not.' In retelling the story of his conversion and commissioning it is notable how he identifies himself with them (2:1) and emphasises the 'Jewish' elements of the story:

- his own impeccable Jewish roots (22:3)
- Annanias's impeccable Jewish roots
- God of our forefathers / Righteous One (22:14)
- his praying at the temple

As he had done so in Athens Paul is trying to 'connect' with his audience. All seem to be going well until he claims that it is their God who has commanded him to take his message about their God to the Gentiles (22:21-22).

PAUL: "A THREAT TO THE STATE" (21:38)

PAUL: NOT A THREAT (21:39)

If anything I'm a 'more genuine' Roman citizen than you are (21:25-28)

TO BE CONTINUED ...

THINKING IT THROUGH

- What limits do you put on a Christian's freedom? How can you be sure that you are right so to do? If you are wrong how might this hinder the gospel? When did you last limit your freedom for the sake of other Christians / non-Christians.
 - Paul's address to a Jewish audience in Acts 22 is very different from Peter's at the beginning of Acts. Why do you think this might be the case? What are the implications for your own evangelism?
-

ACTS 22:30 - 23:35

AIM

- To see God's sovereign purpose at work and unstoppable - Paul shall proclaim the gospel of Christ crucified and risen to the Gentiles in Rome, despite threats and sufferings.

CONTEXT

Paul's proclamation of the gospel throughout Eastern Europe and the Near East is at an end. He now finds himself in Jerusalem having to defend his ministry that has included Gentiles, much to the consternation of the Jews (21:28ff). The crowd are so incensed that they try to kill him (21:31). Luke records Paul's many defences before various tribunals, both civil and religious.

Yet Paul is by no means in retreat. Since 19:21 he had viewed his visit to Jerusalem to be a stop en route for Rome. In human terms, hurdles abound and it seems unlikely that he will ever reach Rome alive as plots against him arise. He is caught between the Jewish and Gentile worlds, between both state and religious authorities seeking to exert their power and influence, and between those who are outrightly hostile to him and those who are merely indifferent.

In this section, Paul goes from one trial to another and from prison to prison, albeit that his status as a Roman citizen would have afforded him a considerable degree of freedom while he awaited the next hearing. In the background, a further plot to kill him is hatched.

In all this turmoil, reassurance comes (23:11). The Lord appears to Paul and tells him to take courage, he has testified about Jesus in Jerusalem, so he must also testify in Rome. Although Paul is in a seemingly hopeless and increasingly dangerous situation, God's sovereign control over his future sustains him in the long struggle ahead.

STRUCTURE

22:30 - 23:11 A MATTER OF RESURRECTION AND REASSURANCE

23:12 -22 THE NET TIGHTENS?

23: 23 -35 PROTECTION AND PROGRESS TOWARDS ROME

A MATTER OF RESURRECTION AND REASSURANCE (22:30- 23:11)

The commander is still none the wiser as to why Paul was being accused by the Jews. He has been unable to get any sense from the crowd (21:34); he has abandoned the idea of flogging Paul on discovering that he was a Roman citizen; and so he now orders a meeting of the Sanhedrin. As a Roman commander he might have little interest in the discussions of this Jewish body but their deliberations might help him establish what was going on and how he might fulfil his objective of keeping the peace in the city.

Paul's opening statement that he had fulfilled his duty to God in all good conscience to this day (23:1) is best understood in the context of his speech to the crowd that ended in 22:21 with his explaining that God had sent him to the Gentiles. This idea of maintaining that he was a zealous Jew while also seeking to proclaim God's message to outsiders had incensed the crowds and no doubt provokes the High Priest's reaction (23:2).

Paul retaliates, insulting Ananias, as he is affronted at being struck. He is still to be charged, let alone found guilty of any crime, and Jewish law should uphold the rights of a defendant. On being told that he has insulted the High Priest, Paul's apology can probably be taken at face value. He might very well not have known who the High Priest was in this unusual setting and has no wish to act contrary to Scripture (23:5).

Paul begins again in 23:6 using his status as a Pharisee, both in terms of upbringing and parentage, to introduce the real point of contact in his argument - he stands before this tribunal because of his hope in the resurrection of the dead. The dispute that follows between the Pharisees and the Sadducees again ends in violent uproar but should not be seen as some sort of decoy tactic by Paul. Instead, he is quite right to introduce the resurrection as a key issue at the heart of his message and this prelude finds its fulfilment in 26:23.

The commander again calls a halt to proceedings and rescues Paul from possible harm.

All hope of extricating himself from Jerusalem and proceeding to Rome seems remote at this stage for Paul. Yet at this very time the risen Lord appears to him, encouraging him and telling him that, just as he has been testifying about Jesus in Jerusalem, so he will do in Rome (23:11). The time frame over the next few chapters should be noted - the struggle to get nearer to Rome takes years and seems very distant at times. Paul's calmness and certainty has this sure and supreme assurance behind it.

THE NET TIGHTENS? (22:30- 23:11)

In marked contrast, the next section opens with a conspiracy being devised on the part of over 40 Jews and the chief priests and elders to kill Paul. On the pretext of wanting to engage in further questioning of Paul before the Sanhedrin, they planned to ambush him and kill him on his return to the hearing. With all involved in the plot, Paul seems in extreme danger.

God's intervention comes via Paul's nephew who overhears the conspirators and tells Paul. The commander is in turn concerned at the news and arranges Paul's safebeing in the next section.

The human forces at work seem both strong and determined to murder Paul but this is not God's plan for him. What is intended for harm against Paul is used by God to move Paul, if not yet nearer to Rome, then at least out of Jerusalem.

PROTECTION AND PROGRESS TOWARDS ROME (23: 23 - 35)

The commander wants to avoid the murder of a Roman citizen so arranges a swift and safe exit for Paul from Jerusalem. The impressive cast of Roman soldiers emphasises how real the threat was perceived to be even by the Commander.

The commander despatches Paul to Caesarea, the provincial capital of Judea thus transferring him to the responsibility of Felix, the governor of the province.

Felix reads a letter from the commander, appraising him of the situation, and agrees to hear Paul's case once the accusers arrive from Jerusalem. It is interesting to note the Commander's own view stated in 23:29 - "I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment".

THINKING IT THROUGH

- We see Paul under great threat and facing opposition and hurdles on all sides. Yet he is confident in his over-riding gospel-centred aim (9:15, 20:24, 22:21). He takes his accusers to the question of the resurrection as the reason why he stands before them, albeit that they argue according to their own terms. He is also given more specific assurance about his journey to Rome in 23:11.
- God's concern and control of the situation is clearly demonstrated, again on both the immediate level and as regards the wider

context. He uses Paul's young and seemingly powerless nephew to foil a plot by the Jewish hierarchy. And what is this all in aid of? That the gospel may reach Rome and therein the ends of the earth.

ACTS 24:1-25:22

AIM

- To see that the offence of Paul's gospel to the Jewish authorities was the claim that Jewish hopes were fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ.
- To see that the gospel was not a political threat to the totalitarian Roman regime

CONTEXT

- i. Paul has 'proclaimed the whole will of God .. to all men' (20:26 cf 9:20-19:21) Having warned the churches to be on their guard against the 'savage wolves' that would threaten to devour them (19:28ff) Luke has alluded to 4 groups who would threaten the gospel:
 - i those who would deny the intrinsic link between serving Christ and suffering (21:1-15).
 - ii those who would undermine the gospel of grace by limiting Christian freedom and introducing legalism by 'the back door' (In this case by prohibiting Christian Jews from being Jewish (12:17-26).
 - iii those who would deny that the gospel is the authentic expression of 'post-Christ' Jewish orthodoxy (21:28ff).
 - iv those who would view the gospel as seditious (21:28ff).
1. The first of these look backwards; the last two look forward to the rest of the book. In the 'defence speeches' that follow Paul is at pains to insist that in following Christ he *is* being faithful to Judaism. And Luke is at pains to insist that all the secular authorities before whom he is presented find no cause for a charge against him.
2. Paul has claimed that the real issue between him and the Jewish authorities was the resurrection (23:6). As his defence speeches unfold this declaration is seen to have been a much more than a smart political ploy to divide his accusers (23:7-8). Rather it is *the* issue that causes his opposers so much offence (24:20, 25:18-19, 26:6-8, 22-23) because it reveals the difference between them: the acceptance of Christ as the fulfilment of Judaism.

ARRAIGNED BEFORE FELIX

THE CHARGE

Once again no time is lost as Paul's opponents seek his downfall (22:30, 23:12, 24:1). The might of official Judaism is arranged against him and he is accused of:

- Political sedition (24:5) being a trouble maker and leader of a sect who has caused conflict and rioting amongst Jews across the world.
- Blasphemy against Judaism (24:6)
it is alleged that by bringing a Gentile beyond the Gentile courts he has desecrated the temple - an offence punishable by death under Jewish law.

THE DEFENCE

Paul insists that neither charge is true. There is simply no evidence that he is a rabble rouser (24:12-13, 18b cf 21:29). Nor is there any that he has offended Judaism (24:18a). Indeed the contrary is in fact the case, for he:

- Worships - not blasphemes - the God of their fathers (24:11, 14a, 14c, 17)
- Affirms everything that is in line with the OT (24:14)
- Shares their hope in God (24:15)
- Works for harmony between Jews (24:17)

The point of difference - and the real reason for their antagonism and for why he was now on trial- has to do with the resurrection (23:6, 20-21; this is nothing new - cf. 4:2). Although they share his hope (24:15) they differ in their understanding of how it is fulfilled.

Paul sees it fulfilled in Christ. They do not.

Paul's public defence before Felix ends on this point (24:21). He will have more to say on it (26:2ff) but for now he has shown that:

- Christianity has nothing to do with political sedition
- Jewish opposition to Christianity sprang from the Christian claim to be the legitimate fulfilment of Jewish hopes.

ARRAIGNED BEFORE FESTUS

Paul was kept in prison for two years without a formal verdict being reached (24:27). However the opposition to him had not abated and with the arrival of a new governor only days passed before the Jewish authorities tried again to get rid of Paul (25:1). They wanted him dead (25:3, 15, 24).

THE CHARGES & DENIAL

Although we are not told the details (25:7, 15) Paul's refutation indicates that the charges remain unchanged (25:9). Once again he denies that he has done anything against Judaism or the state (25:8, 10, 11) and appeals to Caesar. It doesn't seem to be that he fears death at Jewish hands (25:11). So why does he do so?

Options include:

- i Luke reveals that Festus (like his predecessor - 24:27) is a fickle judge who after initial reluctance is now minded to grant a favour to his enemies (25:3-5, 9, 11) despite the fact that he recognised Paul's innocence (cf. 25:25). He was prepared to pack him off to Jerusalem. Paul knows he must go to Rome (23:11, cf 19:21). By appealing to Caesar he will both avoid his enemies in Jerusalem speed his the fulfilment of God's purposes.
- ii. That he is concerned for the churches that would be left behind. If he were condemned (however unjustly - 25:10b) on the basis of apostasy from Jewish law it could have serious implications for the gospel. If the greatest part of the Christian Church stems from the ministry of a Jewish apostate how could it claim to be the inheritor of the hope of the Jewish Messiah? The perceived validity of the Gentile mission is at stake.

THE VERDICT

Luke indicates where Festus' sympathies (influenced by political expediency?) lie (25:9), but no verdict is reached. The formal part of the trial is stopped once Paul appeals to Caesar. However as Festus retells events his own view becomes clear. The issue at stake is not sedition - but resurrection. This had been the case before (cf. 18:14-15, 23:29) and was so again, just as Paul had claimed (23:6, 24:15, 21).

The dispute is over whose position represented 'genuine Judaism' and the defining issue is the resurrection of Christ (25:19). The stage is set for the final defence speech before the authorities (26:1-32).

THINKING IT THROUGH

1. Why was it so important to Luke to make clear that the gospel didn't threaten the state?
How has the disciples' understanding developed since 1:6? Has Christ restored the Kingdom to Israel?
What implications does this have - if any - for the relationship between a congregation / denomination / individual and the state.
Where does political activism fit in?
2. Why was it so important to Luke to make clear that the hope of Judaism is fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ?
How has the disciples understanding developed since 1:6.
Has Christ restored the Kingdom to Israel?
Why does Paul make the resurrection the key issue as he addresses the Jews?

ACTS 25:23-26:32

CONTEXT

Paul's defence speech before Agrippa is the last of the series of defence speeches that have dominated the narrative since his arrest in Jerusalem in 21:33 (cf. 22:1-21, 23:5-8, 24:10-21, 25:8-11).

Paul has been accused of having rejected his Jewish roots (21:27-28) but insists that far from him being an apostate it is he who is being faithful to Judaism (22:3ff, 23:6, 24:14) and his accusers who have rejected it.

Paul and had been mistaken for a revolutionary (21:37-38) and accused of sedition (24:5). All those who hear his defence are unanimous in concluding that the charge didn't hold water and his message posed no political threat (22:25-9, 23:29, 25:8).

The speech in 26:1-29 marks the climax of Paul's defence. This can be seen from not only its length and the fact that it comes at the end, but more importantly because it provides the clearest statement of what Paul has regarded all along as the main issue of the trial since 23:6 and that Festus had acknowledged as such in 25:19 - namely the issue of the resurrection and its relationship to the Jewish hope.

STRUCTURE

25:23-26:1	The scene is set
26:1-23	The defence is made ...
26:24-29...	or is it an appeal?
26:30-32	The conclusion drawn

THE SCENE IS SET (25:23-26:1)

Since his arrest by the local commander in 22:33 he has appeared before ever more important political players. He is on his way to appear before Caesar (23:11, 25:11 & cf. 27:24) but must first appear before King Agrippa so that the charge against him can be clarified (25:26).

Thus far he has been found innocent of anything deserving the death for which his opponents were clamouring ((25:24-25) and this will remain the case once he has spoken. These two statements coming as they do before and after the climax in his defence both emphasise his innocence with regard to the charge of political agitation and focus the charge of apostasy that Paul addressed in 26:1ff.

THE DEFENCE IS MADE (26:1-23)

A number of common themes link these with the previous defence speeches. Paul's:

- Jewish credentials 26:4-5 (cf. 22:2-3)
 - previous opposition to Christ 26:9-11 (cf. 22:4-5)
 - meeting Christ on the Damascus road 26:12ff (cf. 22:6ff)
- and
- the resurrection 26:26:8, 23 (cf. 23:7, 24:21)

What becomes clearer in this address however is the link between Jesus' resurrection and the fulfilment of the Jewish hope (26:6-8, 22-23). Themes from the previous defence speeches are combined to make this previously implicit link explicit. In the process he provides a summary of Paul's place in the unfolding purposes of God.

PAUL'S HOPE IS ISRAEL'S HOPE

The 'twelve tribes' looked forward with expectation to the time when God would fulfil the promises he had made them. Paul looked forward to as well (26:6-7) and yet it was because of this that the Jews are attacking him.

What set him apart from his accusers was his attitude to Jesus and His resurrection (26:8, 23). He had once thought, as they did, that Christians were guilty of blasphemy and had sought to kill them (26:9-11). But now he had met the resurrected Jesus he realised that it was him and not they who were kicking against God (26:15). He had come to realise that the OT did attest to a suffering and resurrected Christ (26:22-23) as the fulfilment of Jewish hopes.

PAUL'S PROPHETIC MINISTRY

As Paul, now for the third time in Acts, recounts his meeting with the risen Christ he 'truncates' events. Ananias doesn't get a look in, and things are recorded to echo God's calling of the OT prophets (cf. Ez 2:1-3, Jer 1:7-8). He does this (in front of someone to whom the allusions would not go unnoticed - 26:2, 27) to self-consciously place himself in continuity with them (cf. also 26:18 Is 42:6 & Luke 4:18) as he proclaims the now fulfilled Jewish hope in the establishment of a people for God (26:18).

What is clearest in this of all the defence speeches is the assertion that the hope of Israel is realised in Christ's resurrection from the dead as the message of salvation - of forgiveness, redemption and a place amongst God's people (26:18) - is proclaimed by the ascended Him (26:23) through his appointed messenger (26:17-18, 20) to all peoples (26:17, 23). And it was for *this* message that the Jews now wanted him dead (26:21).

... OR IS IT AN APPEAL? (26:24-29)

As Paul has before reasoned and persuaded (17:2, 17, 18:4,19) before Jewish audiences in the past, he does so now as one well versed in Judaism (26:27). What he had said is not only true but also reasonable and his defence is also an appeal to his audience to respond to what they have heard (26:27-8).

Indeed it could be argued that one of the reasons Luke has recorded the defence speeches at such length is to demonstrate Paul's method as he sought to reach the Jews. As he had contextualised his message in Athens he does so again, seeking always not only to demonstrate his innocence but also to reach his accusers and those before he is called to give an account (26:29).

THE CONCLUSION REACHED (26:30-32)

By the end of the defence speeches two things have been established beyond all doubt, that:

- i. Paul's message wasn't a threat to Rome. It was not politically subversive - even though it had to do with the fulfilment of all that God had promised (and the establishment of his Kingdom - 1:6, 28:23) it wasn't a threat to the established order.
- ii. The real point of issue was whether or not Jesus was the promised Messiah who in suffering and being raised from the dead was the fulfilment of the Jewish hope.

THINKING IT THROUGH

Why has Luke spent so long establishing these two points (ch22-26).

What would have been missing from Acts if he had missed out the details of the speeches and just got Paul to Rome?

What relevance is all this to us today?

ACTS 27:1-28:31

AIMS

- To see God sovereignly bringing Paul to Rome
- To see that God's kingdom is established by the formation of a new community of Jews and Gentiles.

CONTEXT

Paul has concluded his final defence before King Agrippa and once again has been declared to be innocent of any charge (26:31-32). Luke has gradually been ascending through the hierarchy of authorities and now having faced the King, Paul has only to face the Emperor. Therefore, we are approaching the endgame of Acts and should expect Luke to begin to draw some conclusions as he reaches the climax of his story. In may ways this section functions as a summary for all that has gone before.

STRUCTURE

27:1-28:10 Rome in sight

28:11-31 Rome and beyond?

ROME IN SIGHT 27:1-28:10

There is a huge amount of nautical and meteorological detail in this section and we are bound to ask why did Luke include it? The simple answer is maybe that he was present during the trip (notice 'we' throughout eg 27:1, 2 and so on). Perhaps, due to his first hand knowledge of these exciting events Luke tells us all he knows! However, there is also a theological agenda at work in the way he records the words and actions of Paul.

v.10 Paul is pessimistic about the voyage. We are not told whether he had any supernatural insight. Probably his assessment was based on observation of the adverse conditions (cf 4-9).

v.11-20 Paul is proved to be right as the conditions threaten their lives.

v.21-26 Paul's assessment of their situation changes due to the appearance of an angel of God (v.23). The key verse of the whole section is probably v. 24 where the angel reassures Paul, "Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar". We have seen this pattern before in Acts when Paul's progress to Rome is threatened (23:11).

v.27-44 From here on in Paul's words and actions are full of confidence - v.31 he tells the soldiers to keep the crew on board, v.33-36 he tells people to eat. The result is that all the passengers reach land safely and the centurion preserves Paul's life (v.43).

NB It appears then that Luke's main concern in recounting this detailed journey is to tell us once again that it is God who sovereignly takes Paul to Rome against all the odds. God rules the elements and works through the centurion.

28:1-10

What are we to make of Paul's stay on Malta? Luke recounts two miraculous incidents (Paul being unaffected by a poisonous snake, 1- 6 and then healing various people, v.7-9) but in neither case are we told of any gospel proclamation or belief in/rejection of the gospel by the people involved. Maybe Luke records them to remind us that despite all the indignities of the last few years, imprisoned and now shipwrecked, Paul is still God's man and has lost none of his authority. This is important to establish as Paul is on the brink of reaching Rome, the heart of the Empire and world. God is sovereign!

ROME AND BEYOND? 28:11-31

This section in many ways is a summary of the substance of the book as a whole. Luke draws together the themes which have appeared time and time again in his narrative and ends the book on a note of expectancy and triumph.

v.11-16 Luke recounts the final stages of the trip to Rome. The apparent 'double arrival' (v.14b and 16) is probably Luke falling over himself in his haste to get us with Paul to the major city of the empire!

v.17-20

Luke ends the book by describing Paul repeating the strategy he has used throughout the book - he speaks the gospel first to the Jews. Paul essentially recapitulates the charges and defences of the last six chapters - he once again declares his innocence. He is faithful to the Jewish faith and has been vindicated by the civil authorities (v.17-18). Paul states the real reason for his chains - 'the hope of Israel' v.20. (cf Acts 13:32-34, 23:6, 24:15, 21, 26:6-8, 22-23). Hence, the resurrection remains central to the Christian teaching as it has been since the earliest days of the church (cf Acts 2:24-32).

v.21-23 Acts has established a strong connection between the resurrection and the exaltation of Jesus (cf Acts 2:32-36, 3:21, 5:31 etc.). Hence, it is natural that the book should close with Paul preaching the kingdom of God (v.23, 31). After all the book began here with Jesus teaching the disciples about the kingdom of God in 1:3 prior to being taken to a place of ultimate rule in 1:9. The disciples displayed their continuing ignorance about the nature of the kingdom with the question of 1:6. Hence, Acts could be taken as an extended description of how the ascended Christ establishes his kingdom - he does it as he gathers his people through the preaching of the apostolic message in the power of the Holy Spirit first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. The kingdom is not a political reality (hence the emphasis on Paul being vindicated by Rome) and it is the fulfilment of the hope of Israel (hence Paul tries to convince the Jewish leaders about Jesus from the Law of Moses and the prophets ie the OT 28:23).

v.24-28 Again, these verses record a familiar pattern - some of the Jews believe Paul, others would not believe (v.24). There is a faithful remnant among Israel but there is also continued hostility to Jesus by many. Paul declares a final verdict over Israel's rejection of the gospel when he quotes Isaiah the prophet (v.26-27). Nothing has changed except Israel is more culpable since the messiah has come and they continue to reject him. The consequence is that in the grace of God the Gentiles now hear and listen to the Gospel (v.28). Therefore, Acts has shown us how God has established his one new people by discriminating among Israel and including the Gentiles in his salvation.

v.30-31 These verses are shot through with delightful irony. Paul is under house arrest (28:16) and yet the kingdom continues to be proclaimed boldly and without hindrance! God's rule through his son the Lord Jesus Christ is unstoppable. Luke chooses not to tell us Rome's verdict on Paul, maybe because he didn't know it at the point of writing, probably because it was irrelevant to his purpose. By this stage it really doesn't matter what Rome does to Paul. God has taken the Gospel to the centre of the known world. His kingdom is established among all kinds of people in all kinds of places. The agenda of 1:8 has been completed. Moreover, by leaving the verdict open-ended Luke is telling us that the work continues. We are drawn up into the proclamation of the kingdom.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How would you summarise the message of Acts in a sentence?
- Where do we find our place in the story of Acts?
- How does it give us confidence to live our Christian lives now?
- How has your thinking changed because of this book?