

# 3-13-24 Bible Study Notes

## *THE BOOK OF ACTS* *Acts 15:36-18:22*

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### *Paul's Second Missionary Journey*

One of the greatest testing times in our faith comes when we are confronted by the unexpected. When life falls into neat, predictable patterns, we develop a sense of confidence and even control over our lives. But to do this is to live under an illusion. As a matter of fact, life is always unpredictable. We constantly live on the edge of the unexpected and the unknown. How we think and function when we cross over that edge is a matter of great importance in our discipleship.

In this lesson we will see Paul experience and respond to many unexpected events in his life and ministry. As the lesson opens, his intention was to pay a follow-up visit to those he had previously won and nurtured in the faith (15:36).

#### *From Antioch to Troas*

As soon as the Jerusalem Council adjourned, Paul and Barnabas traveled the almost four hundred miles north to Antioch to report the results. And it was here that they faced a great personal crisis. What seemed like the period of greatest unity for them, turned out to be their time of greatest disunity.

As they prepared to head out on their second missionary journey to revisit the churches they had earlier established in Asia, Minor, Barnabas wanted to take his nephew John Mark along. Paul refused and they went separate ways, never to labor together again (15:37-41).

Here is probably the most peculiar event in the book of Acts. Barnabas was the central figure in Paul's acceptance by the Church after his conversion. Together they formed the "winning combination" in establishing Christianity in the key cities of Syria and Asia Minor. Working in harmony, they had helped overcome a possibly destructive controversy in the Church at the Jerusalem council. If ever there was a "team" in the Christian faith, Paul and Barnabas were it. Yet, their differences of opinion were so strong that they separated. What does this say to us?

*First, it warns us of the danger of living by assumption.* John Mark's defection on that first trip did not seem to have created much controversy at the time it happened (13:13). Perhaps Paul and Barnabas both assumed they had worked through the is-

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sue. But it became the very thing that led to their separation. And in comparison, to other events and issues they would have faced, it seemed to be a little thing. But it was the issue now that threatened to disrupt God's work. This happens all too often in our churches today. Often, when things appear to be going smoothly, contention and disunity create problems.

*Second, it warns us that spiritual victory does not shield us from spiritual unrest.* The church at Antioch was just completing one of its greatest periods of encouragement and revival. Positive attitudes had combined with a spirit of unity to make that period a great time to be a member of that church. Yet, two of their leaders were involved in a dispute. From our vantage point, it is difficult to make a judgment as to who was right or wrong in this case. We do know that in times of disagreement among Christians, Satan can easily move in and create disorder.

*Third, it reminds us that what may appear to be a defeat does not undo the will of God.* Barnabas took John Mark and returned to Cyprus (15:39). And we have no reason to believe that Barnabas had anything other than a successful ministry on this and other missionary trips. We do know from later references that Barnabas's faith in Mark was justified. And there was even an apparent reconciliation between Paul and Mark, for in 2 Timothy, Paul writes, ***“Only Luke is with me. Take Mark and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry”*** (2 Tim. 4:11).

### ***Paul and Silas Revisit the Churches***

As we move through this lesson—the account of Paul's second missionary journey, we will see that God blessed his efforts greatly. From Antioch Paul and Silas headed north on foot almost 150 miles to Tarsus. And from there they made their way through the rugged and steep pass known as the Cilician Gates. Here Paul and Silas connected with Timothy, a promising young man.

Paul was impressed with Timothy and selected him as traveling companion in the Lord. But first, Luke tells us that Paul ***“took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek”*** (16:3). On the surface Paul's action here may seem confusing. After all, hadn't the Jerusalem council settled the entire matter of circumcision?

Yes, it had, but it was important for us to remember that the Jerusalem ruling applied to the gentiles. Timothy was half Jewish. And so the circumcision of Timothy was a witness to two truths, both of which were important to Paul's ministry and to the development of the Christian faith.

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First, Paul acknowledges Timothy's "Jewishness" in the act of circumcision and therefore legitimized the marriage of his Jewish mother to his Greek father. To the strict Jew this interracial marriage would not have been valid. This would make Timothy a renegade half breed. But by circumcising Timothy, Paul demonstrated that he had risen above the narrow interpretation of the Law and that he accepted Timothy's parents now as full participants in God's covenant.

Second, Paul acknowledged the need to fully integrate Timothy into the heritage of his Jewishness. Had Timothy been a full-blooded gentile, Paul would not have circumcised him. But because he was partly Jewish Paul did not want any occasion to arise among fellow Jews where Timothy's personhood would be questioned.

Here Paul established the prototype of team ministry on his first missionary journey. With him then were Barnabas and young John Mark. That combination would no longer work. But Paul still believed in team ministry because he now had Silas and young Timothy with him—two people who were to remain close to him for the rest of his life.

Now Luke picks up in the action (16:6-8). The details are scarce, but we know that the three men traveled *"throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia. . . And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas."*

### *When God Says "No"*

Everything that is written about Paul suggests that he was a man of careful planning. The second missionary trip began with the clear intention of visiting the Christians and the churches where he had been before (15:36). And in the early phases of the trip everything seemed to move along according to plan.

After a time, it seems that Paul wanted to take the gospel into a new territory. He wanted to travel to the far northern parts of Asia Minor. But Luke tells us that on two occasions his plans were redirected by the Holy Spirit (16:6-7). Instead, Paul was directed west to Troas.

This raises the question of how we should respond when God says "No" to us and our plans. Most of us have had the experience of making plans that we felt were right, but then something happened that moved us in a different direction. Most of us can identify with experiences like that.

At first, Paul's vision had been to cover a small territory, but now in Troas he receives a vision for eastern Europe (16:8-10). God speaks to him through a vision, and he

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sees a man from Macedonia who says, ***“Come over into Macedonia and help us” (16:9)***. This was clearly the voice of God—His “No” to northern Asia Minor was a “Yes” to Europe.

It was at Troas that Luke joined Paul and Silas and Timothy—there is now a shift of pronouns from “they” to “we” in verse 19—***“And after he had seen the vision, and immediately we endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel unto them.”*** The four men then took a ship, in obedience to the vision, and sailed across the northern part of the Aegean Sea to the port of Neapolis, almost 150 miles. And from there they walked inland fifteen miles to the city of Philippi. Philippi was an old and established Roman colony, heavily populated by retired Roman soldiers and their families. Here Paul was to establish his first foothold for the Lord in Europe. Here, too, he was brought into contact with a variety of people—some would respond readily, others would be difficult and critical. This would be true throughout the entire trip, but Paul’s training up to this point had prepared him well.

### ***The First Convert at Philippi***

There were so few Jews in Philippi that there was not a synagogue. So, on the Sabbath Paul and his companions went down to the river where some Godly people met together. There they met ***“a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God.”*** Luke then tells us that she heard Paul’s message, was converted, and opened her home for them to use as their headquarters in Philippi (16:13-15). Luke carefully identifies Lydia with her hometown of Thyatira, a Roman colony in Asia. It is believed that some time after this Lydia returned to Thyatira and was one of the organizers of the church there.

One of the great joys of Christianity is that it brings us into fellowship with some wonderful people—people who, like Lydia, use hospitality as an effective form of evangelism. It is quite possible that her practice of hospitality was contagious among the growing Christian community of Philippi because some ten years after this first visit of Paul’s to Philippi, he writes to them and says, ***“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil. 1:3-5)***. Friendly hospitality is a powerful form of Christian witness.

### ***Paul and Silas Arrested***

The scene shifts drastically now from Lydia to a demented/wild slave girl. Her ability to tell fortunes was exploited by her masters who profited from her *“spirit of divination.”* When Paul commanded the spirit to come out of her in the name of Jesus

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Christ and she was healed, her masters were furious and charged Paul and Silas with disturbing the peace and being troublemakers. Since the Roman authorities prided themselves on their ability to maintain order, anyone accused of causing trouble and of being a public nuisance was dealt with severely—Paul and Silas were arrested and beaten. They were then put in chains and thrown into jail. This was their thanks for restoring sanity to a slave girl.

The drama now moves toward its climax. Paul and Silas did not act like beaten prisoners—they prayed and sang praises unto God. And at midnight, Luke tells us, there was a **“great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bands were loosed” (16:25-26).**

### *The Conversion of the Jailer*

The jailer was knocked to consciousness by the earthquake, and when he saw all the doors open, he assumed his prisoners had escaped. Rather than suffer that disgrace, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself when Paul called out and assured him the prisoners were still there (16:27-28).

First, in verse 25 when Paul and Silas were singing and praying, Luke tells us the other prisoners *heard* them. The Greek word Luke used for “heard” is strong—it means “involved listening.” Now the frightened jailer heard Paul’s words of reassurance and was so amazed by what had happened that he asked the crucial question, **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”** Back came the answer that has shaken the world from then until now, **“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (16:30-31).**

The jailer believed. And we know this not just from what Luke tells us, but from what the jailer did next. He bathed their wounds and fed them. Often, it is not our words that impress people, but our actions. A believer is not just a talker—but a doer. We do not know anything more about this jailer than what Luke tells us here, but I believe that he told and retold the story of what happened to him that night.

The scene closes with the jailer telling Paul and Silas that the magistrates have released them. But Paul now advised them of the fact that he and Silas are Roman citizens and, as such, should never have been beaten, and he demanded a public apology.

Yes, like the four missionaries to Philippi, we too will run into all kinds of people as we move through life in our adventure of faith. Some are easy to get along with—

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others are difficult. But our mission as believers is to bring healing and joy to everyone who crosses our path.

With the change of pronouns in 17:1, from “we” to “they” would appear that Luke stayed behind in Philippi while Paul and Silas and Timothy set out for the city of Thessalonica. Luke dismisses the trip with just a few words, but it was between eighty-five and one hundred miles. As we watch while Paul and Silas and Luke ministers both in Thessalonica and Berea, we will begin to see a relationship between them and the new Christians that can best be translated as “fellowship” (17:1-15).

Upon arriving in Thessalonica Paul spent three weeks teaching in the synagogue to the Jews with basically no results except from a few gentiles who responded from the sidelines. But Paul continued his efforts, and his hearers were soon divided into two different categories—those who accepted his message gladly and those who did not and wanted to cause trouble. It is in this kind of setting that we begin to get our first indication of the nature of Christian fellowship. True fellowship is because *together we have decided to follow Jesus*. Community is usually based on common experience, and under the teaching of the missionaries, the believers in Thessalonica became a church noted for its spirit of fellowship.

Another peculiarity of fellowship seen here is that it holds up under pressure. These were new believers, but when the unbelieving oppositions set out to make trouble, Jason and his fellow Christians did not cave in and renege—a true sign of the kind of fellowship that holds firm under pressure (17:6-9).

During the pressure and controversy in Thessalonica we find the effectiveness of the Christian faith. It was said of the missionaries and the new believers that they ***“turned the world upside down”*** (17:6). They saw in this new Christian faith and fellowship a power that could change the world. Christianity was then, and still is, a power that can both change people’s lives and the world around them.

From Thessalonica, Paul and his party moved on another forty-five miles west along the Roman road to Berea (17:10). Here we see that they were received more graciously at first, and Paul had the opportunity to open the Scriptures to them daily and many believed (17:11-12). But so bitter had been the Jewish opposition in Thessalonica that, when they heard of Paul’s success in Berea, they arrived on the scene and stirred up the people to such a frenzy that Paul had to leave. But Silas and Timothy did stay behind for a while to minister to the new believers.



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While we do not face the kind of opposition Paul experienced here, our strength as believers comes in pulling together. We draw strength and a sense of purpose from each other. This does not mean that we will all think alike or act alike, but it does mean that in Christ we are one—we experience a true fellowship with believers—sons and daughters of God—wherever they are.

### *A Reasonable Faith*

From the time of Paul's conversion until now, he had been basically driven from six cities because of opposition to his ministry. And yet he pressed on persistently. Now he was on his way alone to Athens. It was a long trip, more than 300 miles. God's redirection of his ministry was taking him to the capital of Greek culture and philosophy. As Paul moves toward Athens and then as he takes his message there in the summer of A.D. 51, there are four things that stand out.

First, Paul was willing to go to Athens. When Paul left Berea, Athens was not the only place he could have gone. But he chose to go there. While Athens was an intellectual center, it was also a hotbed of pagan worship. There were probably more statues of pagan gods in this city than Paul had seen throughout all his travels. But he knew there were no people anywhere "unfit" for the gospel. And he aggressive in his efforts to reach new converts even as he was anxious for believers to get along together in unity. There was nothing superior or exclusive about Paul's faith.

When Paul actually arrived in Athens, we catch something of his feelings as Luke writes, "*...his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry*" (17:16). And we next find him meeting and talking with people in the synagogue and in the marketplace.

Second, Paul met them on their own turf. He was equal to the Athenian give-and-take. This soon brought him to the attention of the Epicureans and the Stoics (17:18). When they heard that an advocate/supporter of a new religion had arrived in town, they were curious. They took him to the Areopagus (Mars Hill), and it was there that Paul was given the opportunity to explain his faith, "*May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean*" (17:19-20). Paul, now meeting them on their own ground, appealed to them in a way that was consistent with their own philosophies. He knew those philosophers were attractive by newness. So, he proclaimed "a new doctrine"—he offered a new and better philosophy.

In speaking, Paul was respectful and courteous. He talked their language and quoted from their writings, and then he moved in, tactfully yet boldly declaring the truth of

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the gospel of Christ. He offered them a better way, and that is the mission of Christianity—it is our mission today. In practical terms Christianity is relating Christ with His transforming power to every part of life. Our vocation or work, whatever it is, gives us a base for effective witnessing.

Third, Paul approached his listeners with general confirmation. Paul's opening remarks on Mars Hill illustrate his encouraging ability to contact his listeners (17:22). The wording here is dated, what Paul really said was, "***I can tell that you are very religious.***" This was obvious, for there were altars and statues of gods and goddesses throughout all of Athens. In their way they were reaching out to contact the divine. Paul very wisely recognized this and used it as a bridge to proclaim the truth of the one God, the Creator of the universe. He had earned the right to their attention.

Fourth, Paul used the bridge to carry the greater message. Having made contact with his listeners, Paul now shares his faith (17:24-31). From his reference to creation (17:24), he moved them along to the truth in Jesus Christ. Following the conclusion of Paul's sermon, Luke shares with us the reaction of the crowd, "***And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, we will hear thee again of this matter (17:32).***" As would be expected, there are always those who reject outright the message of Christ, but as on Mars Hill, there are also those who readily accept it or remain open.

### ***Obstacles and Opportunities***

Paul is on the move again as he leaves Athen and travels to Corinth. This great metropolis was one of the major cities in the Roman empire at that time. In this final part of our lesson now, we will have the opportunity to see how God can turn obstacles into opportunities. We will also see how we can and should respond when the unexpected happens in our lives. But certain events in our lesson now remind us that when a given situation or set of circumstances appear to be a hindrance or setback, it may become an opportunity that God can use for our growth.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he was fortunate enough to make contact with Aquila and Pricilla, a Jewish couple who had been forced to leave Italy when Claudius had banished the Jews in A.D. 49 (18:2). Relocating their must have been an upsetting experience for this couple, but they were now well settled in as tentmakers. And since this was Paul's vocation, their common skills brought them together. At any rate, the persecution that forced Aquilla and Priscilla to leave Italy became God's opportunity for them to meet Paul.



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Paul soon settled in with Aquilla and Priscilla and Luke tells us he preached and taught in the synagogue, witnessing to the truth that Jesus was the Messiah (18:4). After a while he experienced a glad reunion with Silas and Timothy. But not long after their arrival, Jewish opposition to their message became so strong and bitter that Paul said, ***“Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles”*** (18:6). Once again for Paul, the obstacles of opposition became an opportunity.

Luke tells us that Paul began to minister next door to the synagogue (18:7), and it was not long before Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, became a believer in Jesus. Because of the conversion, other Jews in Corinth accepted Christ, and Paul received a great affirmation from the Lord (18:9-10) that we can take for ourselves today. And it was this affirmation that inspired Paul to remain in Corinth for a year and a half.

Paul gives us one more scene in Corinth before Paul starts his trip home. Gallio, the Roman proconsul, enters the scene. Luke tells us that the Jews who opposed Paul and his teaching took this opportunity to try to get a judgement against Paul. But here we find an excellent example of Roman justice. Gallio saw through the deception of the Jews and inquired into Paul’s character, for Gallio threw the case out of court and ruled in Paul’s favor (18:12-17).

Finally, the time came for Paul to leave. He took a ship and, accompanied by Aquila and Priscilla, traveled across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus. The stop there was brief, but there was still time for Paul to speak in the synagogue. Aquila and Priscilla remained in Ephesus. But Paul continued on by ship to Caesarea and then traveled overland to Antioch in Syria.

Paul’s second missionary journey had taken the best part of three years. He had traveled a little over 3,000 miles—about 1,200 on the sea and almost 1,800 on land. And the land travel was all on foot. It had been a long and hard trip, but the gospel of Christ now had taken root in Europe under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As with Paul and the early disciples, there is an unseen Presence Who guides our steps. There is an unfelt Hand that supports us along the way and a quiet and sometimes unnoticed Voice that says, “This is the way, walk in it.” And we find inspiration in this lesson to believe that as we are obedient to God and follow His leading, He will use us in unexpected ways in the magnificent drama of life.