

Unit 4, Lesson 33: Unit Review

Memory Verse: The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.” (Acts 23:11)

There are eight more chapters in the book of Acts, but they tell essentially one story—the events that got Paul from Jerusalem to Rome. There is a lot of detail in this account that we will miss. Here's an overview:

Paul continued toward Jerusalem. Believers along the way, speaking by the Spirit, urged him not to go to Jerusalem. This included a visit from the prophet Agabus, whom we encountered earlier. But Paul insisted that he would go anyway, saying he was prepared not only to be arrested, but even to die in Jerusalem. When he got there, Paul went along with the leaders there and paid the purification expenses of four men who had made a vow. Paul himself joined in their purification.

Just before the seven days of purification were over some Jews from the area around Ephesus saw Paul and started a ruckus. They falsely accused him of bringing Gentiles into the temple. The entire city of Jerusalem got involved and the people were trying to kill Paul. But the Romans heard of this and came and rescued Paul from the crowd, arresting him in the process.

Paul got permission to speak to the mob, and they listened for a time until he said God had sent him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. The commander who had rescued Paul intended to flog him, but Paul informed them that he was a Roman citizen (by birth) and they decided it had been a bad idea to arrest him at all. But they still had the Jews to deal with, and the commander brought Paul before the Jewish Sanhedrin because he wanted to see what had gotten the Jews so upset.

While there Paul announced that he was a Pharisee and was being tried because of his hope in the resurrection. This stirred a debate between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the commander had Paul taken back to the barracks. A group of Jews then hatched a plot to kill Paul by having him brought before the Sanhedrin again. Paul's nephew heard about this plot and warned Paul, who sent the young man to the commander.

The commander put Paul under the guard of two hundred soldiers and sent him to Caesarea so his case could be heard by Governor Felix. Five days later Felix held a hearing after which he adjourned the case. Felix and his Jewish wife heard Paul again a few days later, but Paul's preaching frightened Felix who stopped him and said he'd wait until it was “convenient.” Luke reports that Felix was hoping for a bribe from Paul, so nothing happened for two years until Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus.

The Jews wanted Festus to bring Paul to Jerusalem, planning to ambush and kill him. Festus may have seen through this. Even if he didn't, he insisted that they come to Caesarea next time he was there. That's when Paul appealed to Caesar. A few days later King Agrippa came to see Festus and Paul was brought in to speak. Paul repeated his story and made a direct appeal to Agrippa. The king's response was, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” (Acts 26:28)

But since Paul had appealed to Caesar, he was sent with some other prisoners under the guard of a centurion named Julius. The ship encountered a storm on the Mediterranean Sea and eventually grounded on the Island of Malta. Paul performed miracles of healing on the island. Luke doesn't say if anyone was converted, but conversions were possible.

Finally Paul reached Rome. Luke reports that Paul stayed there in his own rented house and continued to preach. And that's how Luke's book ends.

We know from Paul's letters to the church at Corinth that he had hoped to go beyond Italy into Spain. But there's no record in the Bible to tell us if he ever got there. Much of the rest of the New Testament consists of letters Paul wrote to the churches he had started, including one in Rome itself. The names of the books are familiar to readers of Acts: Corinthians [Corinth], Ephesians [Ephesus], Philippians [Philippi], Thessalonians [Thessalonica].

These letters show us the concern and love of Paul for the people he had won to Jesus. He often says he mentions them in his prayers. He instructs them like a loving parent. He shows concern when they did things out of harmony with the character of Jesus. And he gets angry when he finds that someone has taught them things that aren't true.

One big question arises for most people who read the book of Acts. The book covers a period of about thirty years. During that time the message about Jesus grew from a little over a hundred believers in Judea to thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands, across much of the Roman Empire. Acts tells mostly about the northward movement of "the Way," but we know that other messengers went in other directions so that the gospel spread out from Jerusalem in all directions.

How could such a big change happen so quickly? The gift of the Holy Spirit takes first place among these reasons. The "power" of Acts 1:8 is the Greek "dunamis," from which we get our word "dynamo." It speaks of ability, of energy, of motive force. This is what the Holy Spirit put in the disciples of Jesus when it arrived on Pentecost.

Another factor was the penetration of Judaism into all these parts of the world. Every place Paul went there was a synagogue where Paul began his preaching. This meant there was a group of people with a background in monotheism. No doubt most of the Gentiles who listened to Paul and were converted at least knew of the Jews, giving them a starting point to understand the gospel [good news] about God.

You may be familiar with modern evangelistic efforts put on by various churches. Very often churches insist on a lengthy period of indoctrination before they will baptize someone. But there were many examples in Acts where people were baptized after less than a day of "instruction." This reflects the fracturing of Christianity into many sects. In order to differentiate themselves, each denomination makes very fine points of doctrine, which take time to teach. The early church faced no such splintering, and "indoctrination" could take place as believers met together regularly.

Maybe what modern Christianity needs is a reintroduction to the simple but radical good news about the character of God. Then we would have something to take to the world that would make a difference in people's lives and would be accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Further study:

1. Review the "sermons" quoted in Acts. What theme unites them? How are they different?
2. Read the last eight chapters of Acts. Find a lesson in one of the stories and write about it.
3. Taking the good news to the Gentiles didn't come easily to the apostles, even after they had been with Jesus so long. What blind spots might the modern church have?