

The Acts of the Apostles

Part Two

Acts 15:36–28:31

Dennis Hamm
with Little Rock Scripture Study staff




LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.littlerockscripture.org

Nihil obstat for the commentary text by Dennis Hamm: Robert C. Harren, *Censor deputatus*.
Imprimatur for the commentary text by Dennis Hamm: ✠ John F. Kinney, Bishop of St. Cloud, Minnesota,
August 30, 2005.

Cover design by John Vineyard. Interior art by Ned Bustard. Maps on pages 10, 21, 29, and 61 created by Ann Blattner. Map on page 65 created by Clifford M. Yearly with Ann Blattner. Photos and illustrations on pages 17, 34, 50, 57, and 67 courtesy of Getty Images; page 30 courtesy of Wikimedia Commons; page 31 courtesy of Ronald D. Witherup, PSS.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.



This symbol indicates material that was created by Little Rock Scripture Study to supplement the biblical text and commentary. Some of these inserts first appeared in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*; others were created specifically for this book by Catherine Upchurch.

Commentary by Dennis Hamm, © 2005, 2021 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. Inserts adapted from *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, © 2011 by Little Rock Scripture Study, Little Rock, Arkansas; additional inserts, prayers, and study questions by Little Rock Scripture Study staff, © 2021 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, except brief quotations in reviews, without written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John’s Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, MN 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hamm, M. Dennis, author. | Little Rock Scripture Study Staff, author.
Title: The Acts of the Apostles / Dennis Hamm with Little Rock Scripture Study staff.
Description: Collegeville, MN : Liturgical Press, [2021] | Contents: Part one (Acts 1:1-15:35) — Part two (Acts 15:36-28:31). | Summary: “A Bible study exploring the early church as the apostles of Jesus become evangelists and pastors, as communities of believers expand to include Gentiles, and as local challenges test the staying power of the young church. Commentary, study and reflection questions, prayers, and access to online lectures are included”— Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020056014 (print) | LCCN 2020056015 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814665244 (paperback) | ISBN 9780814665510 (paperback) | ISBN 9780814665497 (v. 1 : epub) | ISBN 9780814665497 (v. 1 : mobi) | ISBN 9780814665497 (v. 1 : pdf) | ISBN 9780814665756 (v. 2 : epub) | ISBN 9780814665756 (v. 2 : mobi) | ISBN 9780814665756 (v. 2 : pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Acts—Study and teaching. | Bible. Acts—Commentaries.
Classification: LCC BS2626 .H284 2021 (print) | LCC BS2626 (ebook) | DDC 226.6/077—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020056014>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020056015>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome	7
What materials will you use?	8
How will you use these materials?	8
Map: The World of Paul	10
Lesson One (Introduction and Acts 15:36–18:28)	11
Lesson Two (Acts 19–21)	27
Lesson Three (Acts 22–24)	43
Lesson Four (Acts 25–28)	55
Praying with Your Group	72
Reflecting on Scripture	74



Wrap-Up Lectures and Discussion Tips for Facilitators are available for each lesson at no charge. Find them online at

Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles, Part Two

Acts 15:36–28:31

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into four lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book and the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet four times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.


Some groups choose to have an initial gathering before their regular sessions begin. This allows an opportunity to meet one another, pass out books, and, if desired, view the optional intro lecture for this study available on the "Resources" page of the Little Rock Scripture Study website (www.littlerockscripture.org). Please note that there is only one intro lecture for two-part studies.

Every Bible study group is a little bit different. Some of our groups like to break each lesson up into two weeks of study so they are reading less each week and have more time to discuss the questions together at their weekly gath-

erings. If your group wishes to do this, simply agree how much of each lesson will be read each week, and only answer the questions that correspond to the material you read. Wrap-up lectures can then be viewed at the end of every other meeting rather than at the end of every meeting. Of course, this will mean that your study will last longer, and your group will meet more times.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- The text of the Acts of the Apostles, chapters 15:36–28:31, using the New American Bible, Revised Edition as the translation.
- Commentary by Dennis Hamm (which has also been published separately as part of the New Collegeville Bible Commentary series).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the chapters of Acts being studied. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the video lectures available online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is:

[http://www.little-rock-catholic.org/lectures](#) Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.

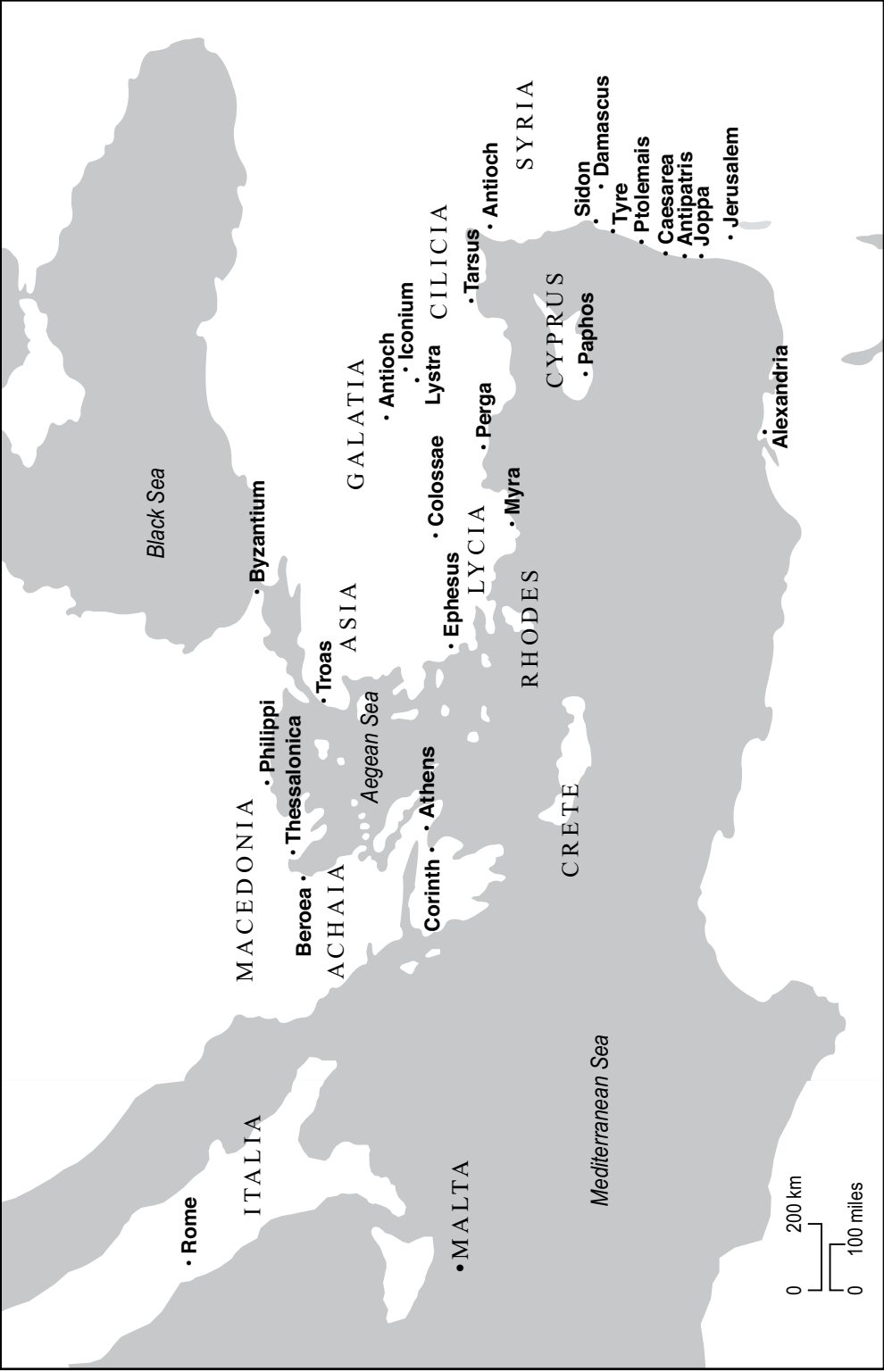
- Read the assigned material for Lesson One (pages 12–22) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session.
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 23–25.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 26 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer on page 11 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- Listen to or view the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. View the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

A note to individuals

- If you are using this resource for individual study, simply move at your own pace. Take as much time as you need to read, study, and pray with the material.
- If you would like to share this experience with others, consider inviting a friend or family member to join you for your next study. Even a small group of two or three provides an opportunity for fruitful dialog and faith-sharing!



The World of Paul

The Acts of the Apostles

Part Two

LESSON ONE

Introduction and Acts 15:36–18:28

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

God of the Universe, we marvel at those who first carried the good news to the far reaches of the earth. Allow these sacred readings to encourage us to carry the gospel into the world where we live.

Read the Introduction on page 12 and the Bible text of Acts 15:36–18:28 found in the outside columns of pages 13–22, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 23–25, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 26 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The Acts of the Apostles, Part Two, covers the second half of the book of Acts (15:36–28:31). As a “refresh” for those already in the midst of studying Acts, and as a brief introduction for those joining the process midstream, the following background information may be helpful.

The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the earliest days of the church. The events described in Acts occurred immediately following the death and resurrection of Jesus and continued into the first generation of believers. These events took place prior to the writing of the Gospels. It is fair to say, then, that as the apostles began to evangelize and tell the story of Jesus, they honed their ability to shape the stories we find in the Gospels. In other words, the apostles focused keenly on the words and deeds of Jesus that would open the hearts of their listeners.

The author of the Third Gospel, the evangelist we know as Luke, is also the author of the Acts of the Apostles. Both books are addressed to a “Theophilus” (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1). The first book, the Gospel of Luke, covers the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The second book, the Acts of the Apostles, takes up the story with a resurrection appearance and the ascension of Jesus, and then follows some of Jesus’ followers as they begin to share the good news beyond the reaches of Judea and into the vastness of the Roman Empire.

While it remains a mystery why the other three evangelists did not also write an account of some of the apostles, it is clear that Luke felt a sequel to his Gospel was needed. Why? By the time Luke was writing (A.D. 80–90), the church was increasingly composed of Gentiles (non-Jews). Perhaps these Christian communities that were a mixture of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds needed an understanding of how the church came to include both. Perhaps they would see that their experience was the flowering of God’s promise that Israel would be “a light to the nations” (Isa 49:6).

Luke also wrote Acts to demonstrate that the life of Christians, individually and com-

munally, is always to some extent patterned after the life of Jesus. Thus Stephen’s death parallels Jesus’ death, the travels and trials of Paul mirror the travels and trials of Jesus, etc. Even early on, believers needed to discover that Jesus was relevant in their own time, not just in the years he walked the earth.

Perhaps Luke also had an apologetic reason for writing the Acts of the Apostles. Apologetics is the discipline of demonstrating the worthiness and truth of a system of belief or body of practices. In the vastness of the Roman Empire, imperial power grew, and emperors themselves became the object of worship. In such an environment, Christianity probably seemed to emerge as a threat. By demonstrating Christianity’s honorable roots in Judaism, which was tolerated in the empire, Luke paves a way for the acceptance of Christianity. This is one of the reasons readers will find references to the ways that Christ fulfilled Israel’s expectations throughout the book of Acts.

About one-third of the content of Acts is taken up with speeches. Some of these speeches occur as sermons to invite listeners to belief, to conversion, and to a new way of life. Other speeches are testimonies by the followers of Jesus when they are taken into custody or are standing trial. These speeches are not simply the reporting of facts; instead, they are intended to convince and convert, to sway and support, to deliberate and defend.

The early success of the gospel among Gentiles, and the formal acceptance of Gentiles as a result of the Council of Jerusalem, occurred in Part One of our study of the Acts of the Apostles. The apostle Peter played a large role in those early chapters, along with Barnabas, James, and a few others. The later chapters of Acts, which are the subject of this study, largely feature Paul and several of his companions as they make their way across the Roman Empire and into its heart, Rome.

As we accompany Paul on these journeys, we will discover a tireless missionary and an apostle who is on fire with the good news of Jesus Christ. Let us begin!



THE MISSION OF PAUL TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Acts 15:36–28:31

The travels described in Acts 16–20 cover two more distinct journeys, the second and third missionary journeys of Paul (and companions). And each journey has a distinct geographical center of gravity: as the first addressed communities in southern Galatia, the second concentrates on major cities in Macedonia and Achaia, and the third centers in, and radiates from, the great Ephesus.

Like the first journey described in chapters 13–14, the second and third also begin and return to Syrian Antioch and include one major speech by Paul—the only address to a Gentile audience (in Athens, 17:22–31) and the farewell address at Miletus to the Ephesian elders (20:18–35). Yet because these two journeys are separated by what is only a brief return to Syrian Antioch (18:22), it may be helpful (and even more faithful to Luke’s narrative) to think of the activities recounted in these five chapters as the Aegean mission. Together, these travels form a whole, moving from what Paul himself refers to as “the beginning of the gospel” at Philippi (Phil 4:15) to Paul’s “last will and testament” addressed to the Ephesian elders at

V: The Mission of Paul to the Ends of the Earth

Paul and Barnabas Separate

³⁶After some time, Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us make a return visit to see how the brothers are getting on in all the cities where we proclaimed the word of the Lord.” ³⁷Barnabas wanted to take with them also John, who was called Mark, ³⁸but Paul insisted that they should not take with them someone who had deserted them at Pamphylia and who had not continued with them in their work. ³⁹So sharp was their disagreement that they separated. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. ⁴⁰But Paul chose Silas and departed after being commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹He traveled through Syria and Cilicia bringing strength to the churches.

continue

Miletus (Acts 20:17–38). The remainder of the book (Acts 21–28) is a distinct segment devoted to journeys related to Paul’s Jewish and Roman imprisonment and “trials” (really hearings) in Jerusalem and Caesarea Maritima, and finally house arrest in Rome.

15:36–41 Paul and Barnabas separate

Luke’s delicate treatment of the interplay between the human intentions and divine will continues to unfold dramatically. What will eventually become Paul’s greatest missionary expansion begins simply with the intention of revisiting and strengthening the churches he had founded in the first mission (Acts 13–14). That God can work with the results of human frailty is implied in Luke’s notice that Paul and Barnabas had a “disagreement” (whose depth is suggested by the Greek word here, *paroxysmos*, v. 38, from which the English “paroxysm” derives) about whether Mark, who had deserted the previous mission at Pamphylia, should be allowed to accompany them. Thus the breakup

CHAPTER 16

Paul in Lycaonia: Timothy

¹He reached [also] Derbe and Lystra where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. ²The brothers in Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him, ³and Paul wanted him to come along with him. On account of the Jews of that region, Paul had him circumcised, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴As they traveled from city to city, they handed on to the people for observance the decisions reached by the apostles and presbyters in Jerusalem. ⁵Day after day the churches grew stronger in faith and increased in number.

Through Asia Minor

⁶They traveled through the Phrygian and Galatian territory because they had been prevented by the holy Spirit from preaching the message in the province of Asia. ⁷When they came to Mysia, they tried to go on into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them, ⁸so they crossed through Mysia and came down to Troas. ⁹During [the] night Paul had a vision. A Macedonian stood before him and implored him with these words, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰When he had seen the vision, we sought passage to Macedonia at once, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Into Europe

¹¹We set sail from Troas, making a straight run for Samothrace, and on the next day to Neapolis, ¹²and from there to Philippi, a leading city in that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We spent some time in that city. ¹³On the sabbath we went outside the city gate along the river where we thought there would be a place of prayer. We sat and spoke with the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴One of them, a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, from the city of Thyatira, a worshiper of God, listened, and the Lord

continue

of the first team leads to the formation of a powerful new team—Paul and Silas. First introduced in verses 22-32 as a leader in the Jerusalem community and a prophet, Silas is usually taken to be the same person as the Silvanus mentioned in the New Testament epistles.

16:1-5 Timothy joins Paul and Silas

This brief passage shows Paul’s nuanced approach to Jewish/Gentile relations in the Christian mission. Even as he continues to promulgate the apostolic decree of the Council of Jerusalem (15:23-29), which frees Gentile converts from having to become Jews, he can still insist that Timothy undergo adult circumcision. Apparently Timothy was raised Jewish by his mother (named Eunice, we learn in 2 Timothy 1:5) but had never been circumcised (prevented by his Greek father?). That Paul convinced him to get circumcised, even though he was now a Christian, suggests that Paul still considered mission to Jews important enough to take this surprising step to make Timothy more acceptable to his fellow Jews.



Timothy was one of Paul’s most beloved companions (1 Cor 4:17; Phil 2:19-22). Paul frequently relied on him as a messenger to his congregations (Acts 19:22; 1 Thess 3:2), and according to Acts, he joined Paul on his second and third missionary journeys (16:3; 20:4). Two New Testament letters (1 and 2 Timothy) are addressed to Timothy, offering instruction and encouragement as Timothy pastors his own flock in Ephesus. Although these letters are attributed to Paul, scholars are unsure whether Paul himself penned them.

16:6-10 The call to Macedonia

The movement of this team of three into fresh mission territory presents again the delicate interface of the divine and human in their decision-making. As they move westward, they

are prevented from moving south by the holy Spirit and from moving north by “the Spirit of Jesus.” When Paul receives a dream vision of a Macedonian calling for help, that call still requires ratification by human decision (v. 10).

A note on the “we” passages

The introduction of the first person plural (“we”) in verse 10 signals the first of the famous four “we” sections in Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16). To account for this phenomenon, commentators have noted that the first person plural was sometimes used in ancient travel narratives as a literary device to evoke immediacy. However, this does not appear to be the case with Acts, a work of history. The abruptness of the shifts from third-person narrative to first-person (and back again) is more easily accounted for as deriving from the actual involvement of the author (or his sources). Moreover, ancient historians were eager to indicate their presence at the events they described when they had grounds to make such a claim. We have no evidence of their making such claims groundlessly.

16:11-15 The conversion of Lydia and her household

Seeking a Jewish house of prayer, Paul, Silas, Timothy (and Luke, if we understand “we” historically) encounter a group of women gathered by the riverside. With marvelous economy of words, Luke describes one Lydia. She is a businesswoman, a dealer in the luxury item of purple cloth, a God fearer, and wealthy enough to be mistress of a household. Such is her openness and response to Paul’s sharing of the word that Luke describes it in language reminiscent of the conversion of the Emmaus pair in Luke 24:31-32: “The Lord opened her heart.” Conversion and baptism lead immediately to generous hospitality. Since the missionaries later return to “Lydia’s house” (v. 40) after their release from prison, she may well have emerged as the leader of the first house church of Philippi (and thus the first in what will later be known as Europe).

opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul was saying. ¹⁵After she and her household had been baptized, she offered us an invitation, “If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my home,” and she prevailed on us.

Imprisonment at Philippi

¹⁶As we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl with an oracular spirit, who used to bring a large profit to her owners through her fortune-telling. ¹⁷She began to follow Paul and us, shouting, “These people are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” ¹⁸She did this for many days. Paul became annoyed, turned, and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” Then it came out at that moment.

¹⁹When her owners saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the public square before the local authorities. ²⁰They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These people are Jews and are disturbing our city ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us Romans to adopt or practice.” ²²The crowd joined in the attack on them, and the magistrates had them stripped and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³After inflicting many blows on them, they threw them into prison and instructed the jailer to guard them securely. ²⁴When he received these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and secured their feet to a stake.

Deliverance from Prison

²⁵About midnight, while Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God as the prisoners listened, ²⁶there was suddenly such a severe earthquake that the foundations of the jail shook; all the doors flew open, and the chains of all were pulled loose. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew [his] sword and was about to kill himself, thinking that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted out in a loud voice, “Do no harm to yourself; we are all

continue

EXPLORING LESSON ONE

1. Although Paul and Barnabas part ways before embarking on a second missionary journey, both men continue to be committed to the work of evangelization (15:36-41). How do you overcome personality differences or practical obstacles in carrying out your role as a disciple?

2. The decision of the early church leaders at the Council of Jerusalem is to forego the requirement of circumcision for Gentile believers (15:28-29). What is Paul's purpose, then, in having Timothy circumcised (16:3)?

3. What is the significance of the use of "we" in several parts of Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16)?

4. The story of Paul's encounter with Lydia (16:11-15, 40) is an example of how Paul forged relationships with people who were open to God's work in their lives. What relationships in your life are rooted in a particular way in your shared love for Jesus?

Lesson One

5. a) What is the charge against Paul and Silas when they are arrested in Philippi (16:20-23)?

b) In spite of their suffering, what good results come from their arrest (16:25-39)?

6. Paul and Silas reportedly spend three weeks among the Jewish community in Thessalonica, preaching, teaching, and getting to know people (17:1-4). In a world that favors instant gratification and quick results, what lessons might we learn? (See Gal 6:9; Rom 12:12.)

7. a) In what ways does Paul adapt his preaching to the Athenians (17:22-31)? Why does he make these adaptations?

b) Why do some of the philosophers sneer at Paul after they listen attentively (17:32)? (See 1 Cor 15:12-19.)

8. What teaching of Jesus comes to mind when reading about Paul's reaction to the Jews in 18:5-6? (See Matt 10:11-14.)

9. Why does Gallio refuse to hear the case against Paul (18:12-16)?

10. Review the ways that Priscilla and Aquila help the cause of the gospel (18:1-3, 18, 26; see also Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19). What avenues are open to those in your community to promote the work of the gospel?

CLOSING PRAYER

Prayer

"He made from one the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, and he fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions, so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far from any one of us." (Acts 17:26-27)

Creator of all that is and will be, we turn to you, humbled by your desire that all people come to know you. Allow each person to encounter you in our world: through nature, acts of generosity, intellectual searching, and our witness to your love. We pray this day that we will become creative in our words and deeds so that people will discover that you are near indeed. Today we pray for the courage to reach out to those who do not seem to know you yet, especially . . .