

What kind of confusion may still exist today? How would you help people to see and recognise the difference?

3) There were some in the ancient world who confused Christianity for another **magic** religion, looking to tap into the power of Christ without necessarily coming to the person of Christ. Do you see this as likely / as possible today? How might you/we guard against this? How is faith in Christ different from magic in your mind? What are the lessons in this for the believer??

Starter

In what ways is Christianity distinctive from other religions? What do you make of the personal nature of Christianity? How does this affect it?



DAILY BIBLE READING NOTES

ACTS

THE GOSPEL GOES TO THE GENTILES

Acts 9 - 19

Term 4, 2012

Contents

Date	Passage	Title
7 – 11 Oct	Acts 9:32-11:18	Peter’s lesson & the spread of the gospel
14 – 18 Oct	Acts 11:19-12:25	Peter’s deliverance & the spread of the gospel
21-25 Oct	Acts 13:1-14:28	Paul’s mission & the spread of the gospel
28 Oct – 1 Nov	Acts 15:1-35	The Old & the New
4 – 8 Nov	Acts 15:36-16:5	Mission Collateral
11 – 15 Nov	Acts 16:6-40	Breaking New Ground
18 – 22 Nov	Acts 17:1-34	God among the gods
25 – 29 Nov	Acts 18:1-28	In Corinth
2 – 6 Dec	Acts 19:1-20	In Ephesus

Pray – that you might have confidence in the apostolic foundation of the church.

Day Four
Read 19:13-19

Think – What an amazing incident – with a somewhat unexpected twist! It speaks of the danger of those who look on Jesus in some magical way. His name and power is not to be manipulated. He is no talisman. And turning to him means renouncing other things.

Pray – that you might recognise both Christ’s power and his own sovereignty over that power.

Day Five
Read 19:20

Think – Once again, we arrive at what is something of a refrain for the book of Acts. What do you think is the significance of this statement being repeated at this point for us?

Pray – that we might trust the power of God’s word in the face of all spiritual opposition.

For group discussion

1) In amongst all of the apostle Paul’s admirable and stand-out qualities is his ‘resourcefulness’. He would do anything to get a hearing for his message (v.10). How do you think our resourcefulness compares with his? What do we lack? What do we have to learn? What do you think might change this in us?

2) Throughout the unfolding story of Acts, we are left in no doubt that Jesus was not just the fulfilment of God’s plan, but as such the inaugurator of a new day and a new order. How do you understand the difference Jesus made?

Week 9 – 19:1-20 – In Ephesus

Day One

Read 19:1-7

Think – This is a classic example of the overlap of the ages! Paul catches up with those who have known (only) John the Baptist and his baptism (v.3). They've been well prepared for Jesus, but have somehow managed to miss out on the fullness of salvation that he brought. Here is a distinctive feature on the book of Acts – the new day has only just dawned and it is still catching up with some (or rather, some are still catching up with it)!

Pray – that the spread of the fullness of Christ's salvation would continue to dawn on those still stuck in the old age.

Day Two

Read 19:8-10

Think – Notice carefully the resourcefulness of the apostle Paul, setting up his own platform in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (v.v.9), and his persistence (it went on for two years v.10). What do you think we have to learn from this example?

Interestingly, his previous stint only lasted three months (v.8). How does this reflect upon the above?

Pray – for shrewdness in aiming to make the word of God known / heard (v.10).

Day Three

Read 19:11-12

Think – How does this statement (vv.11-12) help us to better appreciate the ministry of the apostle Paul? Why might it be important that this short statement be included here?

Making the most of these notes

There was a time when Christian people would not have dreamt of going a day without reading their Bible and saying their prayers. Even apart from any good work performed or service rendered, a daily devotion was considered to be the most vital activity of everyday life. For this reason, some gave it absolute pride of place. (My grandmother would not even eat her breakfast until she had attentively engaged with God!)

Tales of this sort of regimen often sound a little peculiar (even legalistic!) in the modern ear. And while we would be very slow indeed to criticise them for such a practice – the truth is we are even slower to imitate them!

The contemporary Christian's devotional life tends to be a very different matter, and conducted accordingly. While we may readily acknowledge this sad situation and lament it as our loss, we very often feel unable to do anything about it. We consider the problem to have arisen from a lack of time – a crisis which only we moderns suffer from. Now there is of course some truth to this, although it is also true that we have lost far more than just time.

1. We have lost 'discipline', particularly self-discipline. We have no love of routine. We still of course live with some discipline (life would be unliveable without it!), but we always feel ourselves to have enough – indeed, enough to resent it. For this reason, we are invariably unwilling to impose any more upon ourselves. We see discipline as the stifler of spontaneity, the breeding ground of duty – & unlike our pre-modern forebears, we can find no delight in duty.
2. We have also lost the art of 'meditation'. This is particularly true of the contemporary evangelical scene. We look down on Charismatics who can sing a song through more than twice. If we have to sing the same words more than about three times, it is almost as if they instantly lose their meaning. We don't seem to be able to make meaning last in our hearts & minds more than about 30 seconds. We lack the capacity to ruminate & ponder & reflect – to break something down according to its component parts, to assess it in terms of its inner dynamics & logic, to locate it in relation to other truths, ideas & related concepts, to compare it with the similar, to contrast it with the opposite, to apply it to our own thinking, attitudes and behaviour, to turn it into prayer & praise & thanks.

3. Finally, we have lost 'direction'. While once we had a prayer book and lectionary chocked full with programs to follow and material to digest, our movement away from fixed liturgical patterns has left us to our own devices. Modern devotional material tends to focus us hopelessly inward on ourselves & leaves us without examples & models to learn from & emulate. Now many of us feel a bit stuck with what to do & how to do it.

These notes have been designed to help the modern Christian in their devotional life. The joy of hearing God address us in the Bible is still the key to a healthy devotional life. And so these notes are simply that – notes to assist in daily Bible reading. Particularly, they aim to help you to be disciplined, meditative & directed.

What follows then are a series of notes with questions, thoughts for reflection, points to ponder, suggestions for prayer, and the like. Please allow about 10 minutes a day to get through this material. You will note that each week is only broken up into 5 days – that is because it is presumed that for the most part our Bible Reading & Prayer has been incorporated into our regular weekday routine.

At the end of each section are a few bigger questions as well as a suggested Starter that seek to open up fruitful lines of inquiry for discussion in a small group setting. In each case, you may find you have to do some extra work, searching back through the passage for material related to this theme, setting it in relation to other passages of Scripture, considering the alternatives, applying it to your own situation, converting it into prayer & praise.

Bonne lecture! Happy reading!

Recommended Reading

Acts: witnesses to him (FotB series) – Bruce Milne (2010)

basic

The Message of Acts (BST series) – John Stott (1991)

basic

The Book of Acts (NICNT series) – F.F. Bruce (1988)

advanced

- 3) What an interesting little window we get here into a **network of relationships** (Paul, Silas, Timothy, Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos,..). How well do you feel connected to others in the work of the Lord? Who are the people who have had the greatest impact upon you and your growth? Who are the people you think you could get alongside and encourage and strengthen?

Starter

How well connected do you feel to other believers? What part do others have in your life? And what part do you have in the lives of others? What does the nature of your fellowship revolve around?

Day Four
Read 18:24-28

Think – Here we see an early example of new leaders being raised up in Apollos (see especially, v.26). What ‘training’ did Apollos receive? What do you think we have to learn from the way in which Priscilla and Aquila went about this?

Pray – that many more (from our fellowship) might be raised up for the work of the Lord.

Day Five
Read 18:1-28

Think – Throughout this chapter, it is really interesting to follow the plight of Priscilla and Aquila. They met Paul (v.3), they moved with him (v.18), they’re left in Ephesus (v.19), where they are used to great effect in the maturing of Apollos (v.26). Here we see some more of the divine economy as these two are used by him to great effect.

Pray – that for those who exercise a similar ministry, and that you may share in it.

For group discussion

1) How do you expect the next generation of Christian leadership to emerge? What length of time do you expect producing leaders to take? And what sort of process – formal / informal – do you expect? What part do you think you might have to play?

2) So much of mission involves overcoming our fears and reluctance. Presumably this is in part why the apostle Paul was dedicated both to mission and to strengthening the disciples? How robust are you in your faith and in your witness? Where can you see room for growth and improvement? Who would you like to have help you and strengthen you in this? And how open are you to it? What would you expect to be of greatest help to you? What do you think you have to offer to others?

Week 1 – 9:32-11:18 – Peter’s Lesson & the Spread of the Gospel

Day One
Read 9:32-43

Think – How many similarities can you find between the apostle Peter’s ministry here and that of his Lord before him? (You might like to fill in the table below – or just compare this incident with one of those recorded in Matthew 9:1-8, Mark 5:21-43, Luke 7:11-17.)

Peter		Jesus	
9:33		Matthew 9:2 / John 5:5	
9:34		Matthew 9:6 / John 5:8	
9:37		Mark 5:35	
9:38		Mark 5:23	
9:39b		Mark 5:39	
9:40a		Mark 5:40	
9:40b		Mark 5:41 / Luke 7:14-15	
9:41		Mark 5:41 / Mark 9:27 / Luke 7:14-15	

What do you make of these striking similarities? What do you think we are supposed to make of them? (**clue:** see verse 34 & compare Acts 1:1)

Pray – that the living Christ might continue his work through you, and that you might be more and more conformed to his likeness.

Day Two

Read 10:1-23

Think – This little section both begins and ends with a summary description of Cornelius (vv.1-2 & 22)? Notwithstanding the comment made in verse 22 (“who is respected by all the Jewish people”), what do you think the Jews made of such a man as Cornelius? Do you think they thought he was / would be saved? (see, vv. 28 & 45, & 11:2)
More importantly, what do you think was Cornelius’ standing before God (see also in this regard, 11:14)?

Pray – for those known to you whose standing before the Lord is unsure to you.

Day Three

Read 10:24-48

Think – It seems amazing to think with all that has been going on with visions and angels and revelations – and even with what has been said (see, v.22) – that Peter could still have to ask the question he does in verse 29 “May I ask why you sent for me?”
What is the answer to his question? What momentous spiritual occasion has all this elaborate build-up served? (**clue:** see, vv.22, 33, 44 – and 11:1 & 14)

Verses 42-43 (along with vv.39-41) capture the essential message that the apostles have been commanded to preach. Are you surprised that Cornelius didn’t get a message more finely tailored to him and to his particular situation?

Do you remember the first time you heard this message and it made sense to you?
How succinctly and well do you feel equipped to share it now with others?
How often or rarely do you feel like you get the chance to?

Pray – with thanks for the message and the messenger who shared it with you; as well as for opportunities and messengers to pass on this amazing message.

Week 8 – 18:1-28 – In Corinth

Day One

Read 18:1-8

Think – What do you understand to be the significance of the apostle Paul’s statement about ‘responsibility’ in verse 6 – both his and his hearers? What does this have to teach us about evangelism?

Pray – that you might do your part with patience and prayer.

Day Two

Read 18:9-17

Think – Fear is such a significant factor in witness (v.9)! Both then for the apostle, and for us now. What is the answer / solution to this plaguing problem (both then & now)? Compare Moses’ experience in Exodus 3:11-12.

There is such an obvious parallel in verses 14-17 with the experience of Jesus being hauled before the Roman authorities – although here at least Jesus’ apostle avoided the beating! But even still, the complete disinterest and condescension of Gallio is yet another form of rejection and ridicule.

Pray – for courage in the face of fear and contempt.

Day Three

Read 18:18-23

Think – Paul balanced breaking new ground with touring around to “strengthen” the disciples (v.23). What do you think this task involved? To what extent do you think you could do with some strengthening? What might you hope this would involve?

Pray – that you might be strengthened in your faith.

4) Do you think of the good news about Christ as a novelty in today's world? Or as old hat? Why? How does this impact the way in which you share it? How much do you think even those who think they know it really do? How important do you think it is for our presentation to be ever-changing and adapting to contemporary needs and situations? How much effort do you put into this?

Starter

How does Christianity fare in today's market-place? Lack of exposure? Over-exposure? Poor representation? What do you think? And why? And how might you like to see this situation redressed?

Day Four

Read 11:1-18

Think – Here is an amazing incident being reported back in some detail in vv.4-17. How happy are you with the executive summary in verse 1? How well does this capture the event that Peter goes on to describe? What might you have chosen to emphasise from all of this?

Verses 14-18 provide a beautiful little summary of the nature and process of salvation. What are the key ingredients in salvation according to this account?

Pray – for God to do his work of salvation in the life of someone known to you.

Day Five

Read – 9:32-11:18

Think – 11:17 records a really poignant moment of realisation for the apostle Peter: God gives the very same gift (namely, his Spirit) to all who believe in the Lord Jesus (compare, 10:28, 34-36, 43).

In a very real sense we all have the same faith and the same standing before God and the same spiritual experience as the apostles themselves (see, 2 Peter 1:1). What are the implications of this discovery? How many can you think of?

Pray – that this truth might be as firm a conviction for you as it became for the apostle Peter.

For group discussion

1) What do the **similarities** between the apostles and their Lord confirm and settle for you? What questions do they raise for you? What similarities do you expect of yourself both in comparison with the apostles and with the Lord? How do you explain any differences? What similarities do you hope people might see?

2) The apostles clearly had a **mindset** that the Lord Jesus was continuing to do his work of salvation through them (see, 10:34 & cf. Acts 1:1). To what extent do you share this mindset? When you think about your own approach to ministry, would you be more inclined to view it as: Christ working through you; OR you working for Christ? What might be the implications of either view? How might either of these mind-sets stand to impact your work/ministry on the ground?

3) The absolute high point and climax of the episode between Peter and Cornelius comes when Peter shares with him the **message of salvation** (11:14). Everything else serves that ultimate end. Does this surprise you? So much of the rest of this episode seems able to overshadow this. If you could opt for trances, visions, revelations, strange meetings with new people, special trips to far-off places, hospitality from strangers, etc OR just telling someone the message of salvation – which would you be inclined to choose? Why do you think?
If God could communicate directly both with Peter and/as with Cornelius, why didn't he just reveal the truth about Christ to Cornelius direct, do you think?

Starter

How selective are you about those with whom you will share your Christian faith and convictions? Why? What are the criteria for your selectivity?

Think – What do you make of Paul's speech to the Areopagus? What do you make of where he starts? And what do you make of where he concludes? What bits might you have been tempted to omit?

Pray – that you might have opportunities to share this good news with those who have never heard it.

Day Five

Read 17:32-34

Think – How do you evaluate this response to Paul's message? What sort of responses do you expect to meet with today?

Pray – for those who have heard the good news to believe and become followers.

For group discussion

1) In some circles, the **opposition and hostility** some believers will face for their faith in Christ is immense. It followed Paul wherever he went. And it landed heavily on Jason. To what extent have you received some sort of backlash for your union with Christ and with his people? How careful are you to protect yourself from it? How best can you support those who experience this?

2) This passage contains an interesting little word on the nature of true '**nobility**' (17:11). What do you understand this to involve? What was it about the Bereans that elicited this remark? What do you expect that this looked like in practice? What might be the contemporary equivalent? And how well does this match with your own practice?

3) Paul's speech to the Areopagus is considered by many to be a model in '**apologetics**'. What do you think we have to learn from Paul's approach? His point of contact? What do you consider to be your best launching point for evangelism?

Week 7 – 17:1-34 – God among the gods

Day One

Read 17:1-9

Think – You have to feel for Jason, don't you? There is so much at stake for some people in believing (socially, culturally, personally)!

Pray – for someone you know who faced similar opposition for their faith in Christ.

Day Two

Read 17:10-15

Think – Note carefully the commendation of the Bereans' "noble character" (v.11). What would you expect to be the hallmark of such nobility? What did theirs consist in?

Pray – that you might always receive God's word with eagerness and carefully examine the Scriptures.

Day Three

Read 17:16-23

Think – There is great value in 'novelty' (v.19). Do you think it is harder now to get a hearing for the same message than it was then? Or do you think the old, old message is becoming a novelty again? When you are sharing the gospel with others, how much do you expect they will have heard before? And does this affect the way you tell it?

Pray – that you might speak the timeless message with fresh enthusiasm.

Day Four

Read 17:24-31

Week 2 – 11:19-12:25 – Peter's Deliverance & the Spread of the Gospel

Day One

Read 11:19-30

Think – Here we see the spread of the gospel on the back of persecution (v.19). What is the significance of this, do you think?

Why raise questions when this message goes not only to Jews (v.19), but to Greeks also (v.20). What is the issue here? Why would those back in Jerusalem feel that they needed to check on this, do you think? (**clue**: compare again Acts 1:8) What "evidence" do you think they saw of grace (v.23) and of the Lord's hand being with them (v.21)?

Isn't 'Christian' just the most perfectly appropriate name, don't you think? Why?

Quite naturally and as you would expect there were still some serious tensions between Jew and Gentile. How amazing that the predominantly Gentile Christians of Antioch would provide such help for their new-found brothers living back in Judea (vv.29-30), especially in the midst of such difficult times for the whole Roman world (v.28). What a fantastic reality / phenomenon the experience of Christian fellowship is!? Have you seen this? Have you experienced this? Have you extended this to others?

Pray – that you might share this kind of fellowship with your brothers and sisters in Christ wherever and whenever, and despite differences.

Day Two

Read 12:1-19

Think – Verse 5 stands in the middle of one of the Bible's most amazing 'before & after' stories. In vv.1-4, things could not seem bleaker for the apostle Peter and his fate; while vv.6-11 recount the most astonishing deliverance. In between stands this simple statement, "BUT the church was earnestly praying to God for him." What do you think constitutes 'earnest prayer'? How fervent are your prayers? Why? What tends to take the edge off your prayerfulness?

Pray – for new zeal in prayerfulness.

Day Three

Read 12:20-23

Think – What a grim end to such a powerful figure! Think for a moment of the control and influence King Herod wielded: having James put to death with the sword (v.2); having Tyre and Sidon plead for a meeting with him and for peace with him (v.20); having people acclaim him a god rather than a mere man (v.22)!. And yet for all that, he is so quickly and drastically reduced to nothing (v.23). What lesson – or lessons – do you think there is in this episode? Especially for the disciple / believer?

Pray – that you might fear God and him alone.

Day Four

Read 12:24

Think – Here is the refrain for the book of Acts (compare, 6:7 & 19:20). There is something inexorable about the growth of God’s word. What effect is this supposed to have upon us, do you think? What lessons is it supposed to teach us?

Pray – that you might have confidence in the gospel as the power of salvation for all who believe and be committed to sharing it with others.

Day Five

Read 11:19-12:25

Think – So many of the details in the episode of Peter’s miraculous deliverance correspond with the Passover in Egypt.

The timing – during the feast of Unleavened bread (v.3) immediately prior to... the Passover (v.4)

Pray – that those who have benefited from God’s kindness might turn to him.

Day Five

Read 16:35-40

Think – What might you expect to be the fall-out of such a gross violation of Paul’s rights today (see, v.37)? How would you describe the way in which he handled this situation? What impresses you most?

Pray – that you might grow in grace and dignity to handle opposition when it comes your way.

For group discussion

1) How do you understand the interplay of ‘**supernatural direction**’ (vv.6-9) and your own “concluding” (v.10)? Is it as simple as saying two doors closed while another opened up, do you think? When you pray for God’s guidance, how do you expect it to come?

2) In this little section we see a number of **households** in play – first, in the case of Lydia (v.15); and then again, with the jailer (vv.31ff). In each case, the whole household is baptised, and then provides some hospitality (compare also, Crispus in 18:8). What do you make of this phenomenon? What do we have to learn from this, do you think?

3) Alongside one instance of **slavery** (the slave girl), Luke portrays the abuse of a couple of Roman citizens, the apostle Paul and Silas. To what extent do you think it helped the apostle Paul to see himself as a ‘slave of Christ’? Particularly in scenarios described here? To what extent do you see yourself as a slave of Christ? And what impact does this have upon you as a disciple?

Starter

As a Christian, to what extent do you go through life with an ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality? To what extent do you feel like the lives (and homes) of other believers are open to you? And/or excluded from others?

Week 6 – 16:6-40 – Breaking New Ground

Day One

Read 16:6-10

Think – So far we have seen the missionaries and their deliberations playing a decisive role in proceedings, as well as the commendation of others / brothers (see, 15:40). But here we see ‘supernatural’ direction at work (16:6, 7 & 9). How do you understand this? And what point do you think it serves here?

Pray – that too might be led by God in your service of him and witness to him.

Day Two

Read 16:11-15

Think – What is the significance of the statement in verse 14 – “the Lord opened her [Lydia’s] heart to respond to Paul’s message”? How does this affect the way we should think about, approach and conduct mission?

Pray – for gracious and powerful work of God to open blind eyes and heard hearts.

Day Three

Read 16:16-24

Think – What a sadness to see the state of the poor ‘slave girl’ described here. To think that she was not even valued for her talent, but just for the income-stream she generated (v.19).

Reflect for a moment on the consequences of Paul’s exorcism (vv.19ff.). What does this little episode have to teach us, do you think?

Pray – for those who love money.

Day Four

Read 16:25-34

Think – What an interesting response is elicited from jailer in verse 30! How do you account for this?

The incident – takes place during the night (v.6), the angel of the Lord appears (v.7) in a house of bondage / slavery (v.6), to give him the instructions “Quick! Get up. Put on your sandals and clothes. Wrap your cloak around your waist and follow me.” (vv.7-8)

Even the language used is familiar – Herod intends to “bring him [Peter] out” for public trial, using the same term as that is used of God’s mighty hand to “bring his people out” of Egypt (Exodus 13:3 & 9).

What do you think we are supposed to make of this? What is the significance of having such a Passover-like episode take place at this point?

Pray – that you might never doubt the power of God to save.

For group discussion

1) So many factors seem able to **impede Christian mission** – from natural disasters like famine (11:27), through the demise of key figures like James the brother of John (12:2), to tyrannic rulers like Herod (12:3ff). What might be some equivalent factors in our time? How confident are you about the power of the word of God in the face of such things? And how/where is this confidence expressed? What might be the signs of a lack of confidence?

2) It was at this time in Antioch that believers / disciples / followers of the Way were first called ‘**Christians**’ (12:26). Terms are key for identity. How well does this term fit? Why? What other terms might you be likely to use? Why?

3) There is beauty and strength in **Christian fellowship** (12:29). How would you describe your experience of it? Are there specific instances of it that you are especially thankful for? How committed are you to it? How would you account for it?

4) What do you understand by “**ferveat prayer**”? How does the rest of the chapter help you to understand this? They’re still at it when Peter is released

(12:12). But they struggle to believe it when their prayers are answered??
How would you describe your prayerfulness?

Starter

What factors seem most able to thwart Christian mission and impede the spread of the gospel in our time?

OR

How conscious are you of any evil power whose clutches you desperately need God's help to escape? How do you react to this?

3) The decisions from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem created a clear sense of order within God's church (16:4). How do you see such order being exercised in church life today? What are the instruments of it? How big a priority is it? On what matters do you feel obliged to conform and obey? And whose role is it to oversee this, in your mind?

Starter

When we speak of certain people as being "driven", what kind of picture comes to mind? To what extent, do you see yourself as 'driven'? What drives you? And how / where does this come out?

Day Four
Read 16:1-5

Think – What do you understand to be the connection between verses 4 & 5? Would you expect there to be a link between church order and church growth? Why? Why not?

Pray – for the health and good order of the church of Christ.

Day Five
Read 15:36-16:5

Think – This little passage captures so poignantly the potentially high price of mission! Whether you see it in friends and co-workers “parting company” (15:39) or in “having [a young man] circumcised” (16:3) – mission here comes at a massive cost and/but with a clear sense of priority!! How’s your commitment on tis scale? Where have you counted the cost or made some sacrifice?

Pray – that you might have a growing sense of priority and commitment to Christ’s mission.

For group discussion

1) Most of us find ‘**sharp disagreement(s)**’ (15:39) unsavoury, but difficult to avoid. In your experience what tends to be the most likely cause –personality OR principle? And what do you see to be the impact? How do you understand the nature of the disagreement recounted here? And what do you make of its resolution? And what point would you be prepared to part company, do you think?

2) A commitment to the **priority of mission** can come at a very high cost. In this little section we see friends going separate ways and a significant sacrifice being made! To what extent do you feel comfortable with this level of commitment to the cause? How does it reflect upon your own level of commitment? Where do you count the cost?

Week 3 – 13:1-14:28 – Paul’s Mission & the Spread of the Gospel

Day One
Read 13:1-3

Think – Though there is no indication given one way or another, do you think the report we are given of the presence of this number of prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch (13:1) should be read positively or negatively? Do you think they would have felt like they had an abundance or a shortage?

What about when the Lord called for them to set apart and send off two of them (Barnabas and Saul) 13:2-3? How do you think they would have felt about these matters then?

How do you think about church life – do we have an abundance of servants and leaders? Or do we have a dearth? If you were to hear that we are sending some of them off in a different direction, would your heart sink or swim? Would it depend on whom?

Pray – that you might trust God with the economy of his kingdom, and just rejoice at progress.

Day Two
Read 13:4-12

Think – What an awful picture is painted here of Elymas the sorcerer, “a child of the devil” (13:10). Take a moment to think through the component parts of Paul’s accusation in verse 10.

Pray – that you might always recognise evil for what it is in all its ugliness and desperately seek to avoid it.

Day Three
Read 13:13-43

Think – What is the gist of Paul’s speech in Pisidian Antioch? Verses 38-39 contain the executive summary – note the “therefore” (13:38). How well does this tally with the burden of the gospel you believe and preach?

Pray – that you might be as clear and as passionate about this message as the apostle Paul himself.

Day Four
Read 13:44-52

Think – We read here a common theme in the book of Acts – that the rejection of Jesus by the Jews (and particularly, those in Jerusalem) became in God’s providence and plan the occasion for the message of his salvation to go out from Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (refer 1:8).

Pray – for some particular part of God’s world to hear the gospel afresh.

Day Five
Read 14:1-20

Think – What an amazing little passage – such contrasting reactions. From the malevolent stirring up and poisoning of mind that nearly resulted in serious ill-treatment and stoning (14:5), to the persistent attempts to worship and sacrifice to them as though they were the gods incarnate (14:11-13), only to find that Paul did meet with stoning and near death in the end (14:19)!! What a whirlwind!

Again, not unlike their Lord before them. One moment the crowds were looking to seize Jesus in order to make him King by force; the next they were crying out for his death. Have you experienced (though not in such extreme form) something of this kind of polar opposite reactions? How do you handle this?

Pray – that we might have a healthy distance from any excessive reactions with which we may meet.

Week 5 – 15:36-16:5 – Mission Collateral

Day One
Read 15:36-41

Think – Fair to say that the picture which Luke paints of the Early Church in its mission is pretty ‘warts’n’all’ (see, v.39)? How does this new disagreement make you feel / respond? What about the resolution reached? Have you ever found yourself at loggerheads with another believer? How did you handle / resolve it?

Pray – that you might display grace even in disagreement.

Day Two
Read 15:36-41

Think – Here is an issue of leadership over which Christian people still differ today. Can a person disqualify themselves from a position of leadership amongst God’s people, do you think? Or should they always be open to reinstatement? How clear are you on what you think about this?

Pray – for the leaders amongst God’s people – for their model and witness.

Day Three
Read 16:1-5

Think – However do you understand the (somewhat extreme!) measure the apostle Paul takes in verse 3? Given the serious disputation we have just read through (Ch.15), does this surprise you just a little?

Assuming Paul was theologically consistent, what is going on here? How do you understand it? How would you explain it? (**clue:** what was Paul’s motivation? see, v.3)

And spare a thought for poor Timothy! What does this episode reveal about him and his commitment to mission?

Pray – that you might be truly free (so free as to be able to do what you are under no obligation to for the sake of Christ and others).

Day Five

Read 15:1-35

Think – What is at stake in this issue as far as the apostles are concerned (see especially, v.11). What alternatives to ‘grace’ have you heard being promoted? What attacks on ‘grace’ have you encountered?

Pray – that you might passionately uphold the doctrine of salvation through the grace of our Lord Jesus in faith, in witness and in practice.

For group discussion

1) It’s never easy to witness any form of **Christian disputation**. To what extent do you expect it? And what do you most readily assume will be the cause of it? Is there any place for it in your mind?
It’s often said, “there’s a price that you’ll pay if you enter into argument, and a price that you’ll pay if you never do” – do you agree?

2) In addition to disputation, we also see the Early Church **settling the matter**. What lessons do you think we have to learn from the process they adopted here? And what do you think we have to learn from the nature of their ruling? How might you expect such matters to be resolved today? Who has the authority to rule in such disputes? Where would / do you turn?

3) What do you think makes the doctrine of ‘**grace**’ so difficult for people to understand and accept? Do you think it is harder for the religious or the irreligious? Why? How clear do you think the church is today on this matter? How clear are you?

Starter

When people see Christians arguing, what signals do you think this sends? Is there ever anything positive in it?

OR

Martin Luther understood the doctrine of ‘justification by faith’ to be that article of faith by which the church either stands or falls. Agree? Why / why not?

Day Six (Sorry!)

Read 14:21-28

Think – Here we find them wrapping up their first tour of duty, returning to the place from where it all began (14:26), and reporting back the good news of God opening the door of faith to the Gentiles (14:27).

What do you make of their concern to “strengthen and encourage” the disciples (v.22)? From what follows here, how do you think they sought to do this?

Pray – that you might be a source of strength and encouragement to others.

For group discussion

1) The **priority of mission** is a palpable lesson in this section – from the corporate cost to the church at Antioch (13:3), to the personal cost borne by Paul and Barnabas (14:19). How would you rate your personal / our corporate commitment to mission? How would you describe the nature of your / our involvement in it? Your / our cost and sacrifice for it?

2) Each section of the narrative of Acts seems to contain multiple iterations of **the gospel** (see, 13:38-39). What do you make of the consistency of the content of this message? What lessons do you think we have to learn from such consistency, clarity and brevity? What complicates preaching the gospel in our experience?

3) Here we meet such extreme and opposite **responses to the gospel message** – how do you account for such mixed reactions? What kind of reactions do you tend to get? And what sort do you expect? How do you handle them?

4) It’s nice to hear the first evangelists **evaluating their mission** (14:21-28). And while there was no doubt much more to report than what we have recorded for us here, are you surprised by the salient features which are touched on? What is so strengthening and encouraging about their words in

verse 22? And what does this imply? Why might they have moved so quickly to establish a formal leadership (“elders”) v.23? What does this reveal?

Starter

What do you think is required for commitment to mission (both individual and corporate)?

Week 4 – 15:1-35 – The Old & the New

Day One

Read 15:1-5

Think – Here we read of a “sharp dispute” (v.2). How do you react to this? What kind of things do you expect to cause such sharp disputation within the church? Are there legitimate grounds for such disputation, do you think? What is the cause of it here?

Pray – that you might have courage never to compromise on core convictions.

Day Two

Read 15:6-21

Think – Reflect on the verdicts of both Peter (vv.7-11) and James (head of the church in Jerusalem) vv.13-21. How would you summarise their positions and their concerns?

Pray – for clarity on matters of first importance, and grace in others.

Day Three

Read 15:22-29

Think – How do you read the letter that settles this matter? What do you make of its tone? And what of its content?

Pray – for the unity and harmony of God’s church in common commitments.

Day Four

Read 15:30-35

Think – How was this letter delivered and received? And why might this have been so important? (compare v.24) What do you think we are supposed to learn just from the process that was undertaken to address this issue?

Pray – that you might have discernment to recognise legitimate authority and grace to maintain good order.