

Acts 17–20: Second & third missionary journeys

Last week we saw how Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to proclaim the good news of Jesus to gentiles (Acts 13), how the people of Lystra misunderstood them (Acts 14), how the church wrestled with what gentiles must do to join the covenant people (Acts 15), and how they faced jail for disrupting the Roman culture when they freed a possessed slave (Acts 16). Any questions before we continue?

Acts 17: Greece

Tonight we see Paul complete his second missionary journey, and head back to Jerusalem. We pick up the story as Paul makes the three-day walk from Philippi to Thessalonica in Macedonia.

Thessalonica (18:1-9)

Three weeks is all Paul had in Thessalonica. His message was *explaining that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead* (verse 3).

Those who rejected this message *formed a mob and started a riot* (verse 5):

Acts 17:6-7 (NIV)

⁶ When they did not find them [Paul and Silas], they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here,⁷ and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that **there is another king**, one called Jesus.”

So, as soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea (verse 10).

Later, Paul wrote two letters to Thessalonica. These letters, along with Galatians, are the earliest books of the New Testament to be written.

These letters are fascinating. Paul sets them straight on what to expect in the future, how Christ will return to reign as king in *the day of the Lord* (1 Thessalonians 4–5). Is that what you would focus on for new Christians?

For Paul, the gospel is the good news that God has installed his anointed (his *Christ*) to reign over the world (our *Lord*). That’s why he was accused of sedition against the existing rulers: *defying Caesar’s decrees, saying there is another king, one called Jesus* (verse 7).

Berea (18:10-15)

65 kilometres west of Thessalonica was Berea. Here the Jews *received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true* (verse 11). But the Thessalonians stirred up the Bereans (verse 13), so Paul escaped to the coast and headed for Athens (verses 14-15).



Map 23, *Standard Bible Atlas* (Standard Publishing, 2006), 36.

Athens (17:16-34)

Athens was at the heart of Greek democracy, learning, and art. But how do you introduce the gospel in such a culture?

Paul was *brought* to the Areopagus (verse 19). It was the highest court in Athens, and Paul was being asked to explain himself. His message about *Jesus and the resurrection* sounded like *advocating foreign gods* (verse 18), *bringing strange ideas* (verse 20).



Areopagus (foreground) and Parthenon, Athens. [Wikipedia](#)

Athena was the main god of Athens. The ruins of her famous temple—the Parthenon—are still atop the hill overlooking Athens, with the Areopagus part way up.

Acts 17:22-23 (NIV)

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said:

“People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.

²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.

So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.”

What does Paul have in common with these idol-worshippers? We know Paul was *greatly distressed to see the city was full of idols* (verse 16). When talking to Jews, Paul appeals to Scripture, but he can't do that here. He tries to find common ground with them (as in 1 Corinthians 9:21).

Remember the debacle at Lystra? Lystra's idea of a “god” was so different from Paul's that they began worshipping him! He learned from that experience. He begins by clarifying what “God” he's talking about.

Note what he affirms, and what he denies:

17 ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

The Source of everything has authority over everyone (our Lord).

We don't make ourselves a god; this God does not fit in man-made temples.

17 ²⁵ And He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything.

Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

This God does not need the sacrifices (gifts) that people offer.

Everything—even the breath in our lungs—is a gift from God.

17²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

Since all nations have their origin in the Creator who gave them their existence, any nation that worships a local god is missing the main one.

17²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

God allowed the nations go their own way, but his goal was always to woo them back under his leadership when they grew tired of power-through-violence. This was why God called Abraham, That was the reason for Israel's existence as a nation. The Spirit of God promised them, "*If you seek him, he will be found by you*" (2 Chronicles 15:2).

What evidence does Paul have that these Greeks are seeking God? It's in their poetry:

17²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'
As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

The first line is sometimes attributed to Epimenides from Crete who lived in the 500s BC. The second line is from Aratus, a poet from Cilicia (where Paul grew up) who lived around 300 BC.¹¹

Pop songs are the poetry of our culture. Many songs simply seek the self, exploring my own emotions. But some songs take us outside ourselves, yearning for meaning and connection. What songs come to mind, songs you could use in conversations about searching for someone beyond ourselves?

.....
We find our identity as children of the cosmic sovereign, made in his image.
The trouble is that people flip that backwards, making images of God to suit us:

17²⁹ Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

To *repent* is to turn to God, in contrast with pursuing our own gods. But how do you find this God? So far, Paul has been talking about the way God has made himself known in the world, in his creation. But ultimately we meet God in the person of Jesus Christ, the leader whom God has appointed as ruler for all peoples:

17³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

What is the evidence that Jesus is the Christ, the God-appointed Lord whom all humanity should recognize? The evidence is that when the rulers of this world killed him to keep their own power, God overturned this injustice by raising him from the dead. That is how the apostles proclaim the gospel. The resurrection is the evidence that "God has made this Jesus ... both our Lord and his Messiah" (Acts 2:36).

¹¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Zondervan, 2012), 737.

But a Greek court cannot accept the notion of a god overruling an execution, raising the deceased from the dead as Lord of all. They dismiss Paul as a weirdo:

17³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.”

Everyone knows they won't listen to Paul again. Only a few believed (verse 33).

Acts 18: Corinth

It's now around AD 50, two decades after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.¹² Paul leaves Athens for Corinth, 90 kilometres away.

Corinth was on the southern side of the narrow isthmus that separated the Peloponnese from the rest of Greece. Today the 6-kilometre Corinthian Canal lets ships pass east-west. In New Testament times cargo was unloaded, shipped across land, and reloaded. This east-west and north-south trade made Corinth a wealthy city.

There were many Jews in Corinth because Emperor *Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome* (18:2). As usual, Paul began with them, *presenting evidence to the Jews that Jesus was the Anointed ruler* (18:5).



The Corinthian Canal today

Examples of suffering (18:1-17)

As usual, Paul's message divided people. Some opposed Paul and became abusive (verse 6). Some—including the synagogue leader—placed their trust in Jesus as Lord, and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized (verse 8).

Paul had already been stoned and left for dead by his own people (14:19), and beaten by Roman officials (16:37). He needs reassurance that it's safe to stay here:

Acts 18:9–11 (NIV)

⁹ One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” ¹¹ So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

But the Jews who disagreed with Paul were zealous to stop the new movement: *people worshipping God in ways contrary to the Law* as they see it (verse 13).

Acts 18:17 (NIV)

The crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever.

Whether we're talking about family violence, communal violence, or international violence (war), violence is an attempt to control people. These violent Jews were

¹² Gallio (named in Acts 18:12) served briefly as proconsul of Achaia under Emperor Claudius in AD 52.

zealous to control how the others interacted with God, just as Paul did before he met Jesus (Acts 8:1). The proconsul lets the violence continue, treating it as their problem. Isn't that what the proconsul of Judea did with Jesus, refusing to intervene to prevent the death of an innocent man? (Matthew 27:24)

Just like their Lord, Jesus' followers must absorb the violence, bearing away the sin of the world. Violence may oppress people into submission, but only bearing away the injustice can liberate the world. No one wins wars; we can only win people.

The wisdom of how God rules makes no sense to the rulers of this world. Keeping their foot on their opponents' neck makes more sense to them (e.g. Exodus 1:10). They can't understand a king who bears in his own body the sufferings of his people, for the cross looks like weakness. That's what Paul told the Corinthians in his letter (1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:15).

Examples of wisdom: Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos (18:18-28)

Priscilla and her husband Aquila join Paul as he begins the journey back to Jerusalem. Paul still practices Judaism: he cuts his hair as an expression of a vow (verse 18). He never gave up being a Pharisee (23:6).

Priscilla and Aquila stay in Ephesus. There they meet another Jew named Apollos from Alexandria, a city on the north coast of Egypt with a reputation for scholarship and one of the best libraries in the ancient world.

Acts 18:24–26 (NIV)

²⁴ A Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus.

He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.

²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue.

When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

How amazing is that! The gospel that Jesus is Lord of all people has already made its way down to Egypt, without and involvement from Peter or Paul or the apostles. Apollos is quite the orator, and he uses his skills to proclaim Jesus as Lord.

Priscilla and Aquila don't have Apollos' education, but they've been working alongside Paul (verse 3) and they understand more about baptism. Sharing a meal (or a coffee) is a great opportunity to resolve different ways of seeing things.

Did you notice that Priscilla is the initiator here? As we saw with Paul and Barnabas, Luke is intentional with the name he puts first (verses 18, 19, and 26). Paul regarded Priscilla as his co-worker, along with her husband (Romans 16:3). The house where the Corinthian church met may have been in Aquila's name (1 Corinthians 16:19), but Paul usually puts her first (2 Timothy 4:19).

In the kingdom of God, men and women participate equally in Christ reign, just as God intended in the beginning (Genesis 1:26-28), and educated people can learn from unskilled people who've responded to God calling us to recognize his Christ:

1 Corinthians 1:26, 30 (NIV)

²⁶ Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ... ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

Acts 19: Ephesus

After 18 months in Corinth (18:11), Paul visited Ephesus on his way back to Jerusalem (18:19–22). In New Testament times, Ephesus was a major port on the west coast of Türkiye. Today Ephesus is 6 kilometres inland, due to silting of the valley.

From Jerusalem, Paul set out for his **third missionary journey**. Taking the land route north to Antioch and then west through Celicia, and Galatia, he returned to Ephesus where he stayed for two years (19:10).

Ephesus (19:1–22)

The Holy Spirit guided the leaders at the Jerusalem Council (15:28) and guided Paul as he proclaimed Jesus (16:6–7). But Holy Spirit empowers the community as well:

Acts 19:1–6 (NIV)

¹ Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples ² and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

³ So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?”

“John’s baptism,” they replied.

⁴ Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.”

⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

⁶ When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.



Paul's third missionary journey, *Standard Bible Atlas* (2006), 37

John the Baptist called the Jewish community to prepare themselves for the coming of God's Christ. Such ritual cleansings were common in New Testament times.¹³ But baptism into Christ is different. Baptism marks our recognition of Jesus as our leader: his name carries authority (verse 5).

All who recognize that God has made his Messiah our Lord are empowered with the Spirit who anointed him (Acts 2:36-38; 10:44-48). That's why Paul expects us all to receive the Holy Spirit anointing of the Christ when we recognize Christ as Lord. Paul prays for this in other places too (Romans 1:11; 2 Timothy 1:6).

How would you summarize Paul's gospel if it's all about proclaiming God's Christ as our Lord? What was Paul trying to convince people about? (verse 8)

As the port for the region, Ephesus became the base from which the gospel spread to *the province of Asia* (verse 10). By the end of the first century there were seven cities in the province of Asia where people recognized Jesus as king—the seven churches of Revelation (1:4; 2:1–3:22).

In the two years Paul stayed there, Ephesus saw many miracles (19:11-12). The miracles are all about Jesus' authority, the power of the Christ breaking into the present.

Some Jewish exorcists tried to use Jesus' name as a magic incantation to drive away demons. It didn't end well, because they were not in submission to Christ's authority. (19:13-16).

The Ephesus riot (19:23-41)

The gospel that Jesus is king clashes with other claims to authority. Jesus' authority is unwelcome to those who want to be in power, those who prioritize economic growth, and those who call on other spiritual powers.

Ephesus was a wealthy trade city, with temples to the emperors and gods. Artemis was the main god, responsible for hunting, childbirth, and the environment. Her temple was enormous: *67 by 130 meters, ... the largest religious building in the Hellenistic world, about four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens.*¹⁴

Acts 19:23-41 (NIV)

²³ About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way.

²⁴ A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. ²⁵ He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: "You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. ²⁶ And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. ²⁷ There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredit-

¹³ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/12/16/where-did-baptism-come-from/>

¹⁴ Paul R. Trebilco, "Ephesus," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (IVP, 2023), 262.

ed; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”

²⁸ When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ²⁹ Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theatre together.

This mob forms a procession from the guild hall in the centre of town to the amphitheatre overlooking the harbour. The Ephesus theatre could hold 24,000 spectators.

Jesus’ authority is not limited to the spiritual realm. It restructures everything. The good news that Jesus is our God-appointed king upsets the existing powers in every realm of life. In Ephesus, it upset the worship of Artemas, the economic system of those who made gods for the tourists, and the political powers that rely on this economic system.

Paul sees the crowd as a huge opportunity to promote Jesus’ authority.

The Jesus-followers

realize that the crowd as a mob was likely to lynch Paul:

19 ³⁰ Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. ³¹ Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theatre.

³² The **assembly** was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.

An angry mob lumps Paul in with the other Jews who don’t like idols either:

19 ³³ The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander to the front, and they shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defence before the people. ³⁴ But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours:

“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

A city official tries to calm the riot. There’s no evidence of a crime against Artemas:

19 ³⁵ The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: “Fellow Ephesians, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven?



View toward the now-silted harbor from the theatre at Ephesus.
Zondervan Atlas of the Bible (Zondervan, 2010) 230.

³⁶ Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm down and not do anything rash. ³⁷ You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess.

³⁸ If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. ³⁹ If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal **assembly**. ⁴⁰ As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.”

⁴¹ After he had said this, he dismissed the **assembly**.

The word *assembly* in verses 32, 39, and 41 is *ekklēsia*. It's the same word translated as “church.” In the Greek world it was used of a political assembly called to resolve the city's issues. But this riot is not a legal *ekklēsia*, with no power to resolve anything.

The NT writers chose this word (*ekklēsia*) to describe who we are. **The church is:**

the assembly of people who gather around King Jesus (the Christ),
declaring his leadership (Lord of all) and implementing what he wants done
in our communities by living under his leadership,
“christed” (anointed) with the Holy Spirit who raised him out of death and
brings us to life to be his corporate presence (body) in his earthly realm.

How does that definition sit with you? What part is he calling you to play?

.....
.....
.....

I guess that's what it means to love God and love people. Loving God involves recognizing, valuing, and responding to his authority over us. Loving people involves recognizing and valuing every person as our King does, caring for them as he cares.

Acts 20: Travelling back through Greece, Troas and Ephesus

Returning through Macedonia and Greece (20:1-12)

Paul is now on his way back to Jerusalem, visiting the churches of Macedonia and Greece as he goes (19:21; 20:1-2). A threat on his life prevents him sailing direct to Syria (Antioch), so he takes the long way back through Ephesus (20:3).

There's a humorous story about someone falling asleep while Paul *talked on and on* (20:9). Well, it would be humorous if the guy hadn't fallen three stories and died! Paul threw his arms around the corpse (compare 2 Kings 4:35), and restored Eutychus to life (20:10).

Paul's farewell to the elders of Ephesus (20:13-37)

Paul calls the elders of Ephesus to meet him at Miletus, about 100 km south (verse 18).

With both his lifestyle and his words, Paul has modelled what it means to be a servant of King Jesus, even in the face of tears and pressure (verse 19).

Paul's message has been that both Jews and Greeks must *turn to God* and place their *trust* in Jesus as our leader (verse 21). That's what he means by *repentance* and *faith*. Calling people to turn to God (repent) and to trust the one whom God has installed as Lord of all—that's *proclaiming the kingdom* (verse 25).

Since they will never see Paul again (verse 25), he entrusts them with responsibility to announce and enact Christ's kingship over their community:

Acts 20:28–38 (NIV)

²⁸ "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."

When God entrusts power to human hands, we have a history of misusing it. That's why Israel fell apart: the shepherds were eating the sheep (Ezekiel 34). That's the number one danger in churches, in communities, in nations, in the world. Our shepherd-king did not bloody the sheep for his own benefit. He redeemed the community with his own blood (verse 28).

That servant-shepherd heart is what Paul has been modelling:

20 ³³ "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. ... ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

The concluding quotation was not a proof-text to help the elders fleece the sheep. It's not recorded in the Gospels; it's a summary of the lifestyle our king embodied. The rest of the world focuses on what we can *receive*: better pay and conditions, superannuation, increasing your portfolio of shares and real estate. Jesus focused on what he could *give*: his life, so the world could be freed from slavery to evil.

That's the example Paul embodied, and he called us to embody it too. The whole community must live unselfishly if it is the kingdom expressing the life of its king.

So, did the elders hear what Paul was saying? Partly.

At the end of the first century, Ephesus was still a leading church in the region. It's the first one Jesus addressed in the revelation he gave to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 2-3). He commended them for guarding against wicked people (2:2) and for persevering in the face of hardship (2:3).

But they have not maintained the servant heart of helping the weak, of embodying a community where it's more blessed to give than to receive. The king who holds the shining stars of his kingship in his hands (2:1) rebukes them:

"You have forsaken the love you had at first" (2:4).

We cannot be a lampstand of our king if we don't embody his servant heart (2:5).

Reflection

Consider how Paul communicated with the people of **Athens** who had no background in the Jewish Scriptures (**Acts 17:22-31**). Australia today is like that.

There was a time when an evangelist like Billy Graham could say, "The Bible says ..." and it was authoritative for most Australians. That's no longer the case. The majority of Australians do not identify as Christians. They never attended Sunday School, and many have not ever heard of Jesus.

So, how do we communicate God to people who have no background in Scripture? What can we learn from the way Paul approached the people of Athens?

.....

.....

.....

.....

What about the way Paul communicated the good news with **Corinth** in **Acts 18**? Was there anything that stood out as helpful for us?

.....

.....

.....

.....

What about **Ephesus** in **Acts 19**? What was Paul's message in **Ephesus**? Why did they perceive his message as so confrontational of their way of life? In what ways do people today perceive the gospel as confrontational for their way of life? How do we respond?

.....

.....

.....

.....

How do understand the role of the church in the community? What does it mean to be the *ekklēsia of the Lord*? How do we engage with that role, deliver that message, and embody the community that gathers around the king whom God raised up and enthroned over the earth? How does Paul's farewell message to the **Ephesian elders** in **Acts 20** help us to clarify our role?

.....

.....

.....

.....

Everywhere Paul goes, he proclaims the *gospel*, and the people who respond become the *church*. What is the relationship between *gospel* and *church*?

Michael Bird describes it like this in his book *Evangelical Theology* (Zondervan, 2013):

Think of the church as “the community of the gospelized”! When you magnetize a piece of metal, the metal becomes magnetic. When you sterilize a surgical tool, the tool becomes sterile. When you tenderize a piece of meat, the meat becomes tender. When a person or a church is gospelized, they ooze gospel, they bleed Jesus, they overflow with Spirit, they radiate the Father's glory. (page 705)

We are the community of the gospelized: the company of the gospel, the public face of the gospel, the hermeneutic of the gospel. The worship, mission, ethics, symbols, testimony, and spirituality of the church are shaped by what it thinks of and what it does with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the mark and mission of the authentic church of Christ. (page 707)

If that's right, the gospel is not something we accept and then move on to other things. If the gospel is the good news that God has placed his Messiah in charge of the world (that his Christ is our Lord), then the church is the community created by the gospel of the resurrected Christ, the community that embodies his restorative power in God's world. How does the gospel shape our daily lives and relationships?

.....

.....

.....

.....

For next week, please read Acts 21–24.