

## Summary for Session 23: The Church Part 3

Prep work: Acts of the Apostles 15-28

DVD: Jeff begins this final session by reviewing the previous sessions on the Church and then delving into Paul's missionary journeys. Jeff comments that Paul and his companion, Barnabas, are commissioned by the Apostles to go out on this journey, and the Apostles lay hands on the men and bless them before they go on their way. Using Antioch as their "base camp", the men set out to spread the Gospel and start new Church communities. In their travels, they were often met with violence—in Lystra for instance, Paul was stoned and left for dead. Fortunately, he survived, returned to Antioch, and reported to the disciples there on the communities he and Barnabas started. Jeff pauses to note that Barnabas' name means "son of encouragement," which fits his role in spreading and encouraging the Gospel message.

Paul sets out on his second missionary journey after the Council of Jerusalem, in which it was decided that Gentiles did not need to become Jews before being baptized into the Church. The Bible records a division in the thinking of Paul and Barnabas, as Barnabas wished to take along John, called Mark, and Paul did not (Acts 15:39). In the end, Barnabas took John-called-Mark and went to Cyprus, while Paul took a man named Silas with him through Syria and Celicia. The purpose of this trip was to check on the communities already started and deliver the decision of the Jerusalem Council. Jeff observes that Paul's pattern of work is to establish a community, visit it periodically, and write it letters addressing problems the community is having. A man named Timothy will join Paul on his journey at this point; he will later become the pastor of the large community at Ephesus. When Paul reaches Troas, on the coast of modern-day Turkey, he has a vision of a Macedonian begging him to come and preach to the people there. This is significant because Macedonia is in Europe, and it signaled a new expansion of the Gospel outside of Asia Minor. Paul's first European stop is in Neapolis (Jeff likes to lead tours there to encounter "the first" place of Paul in Europe). Soon after, Paul goes to Philippi, and his first European convert is a woman named Lydia. Paul also encounters the occult for the first time, as he exorcises a demon from a slave girl whose master was hoping to make money off of her fortune-telling (Acts 16:16-19). For this, a crowd rises against him and he and his companions are thrown in prison, only to be freed by a miraculous earthquake. Instead of running from the prison, they stay and tend to the jailer, preaching to him and baptizing him and his family. Jeff notes that we, like Paul, should always look for the potential of our enemies to become allies. Paul and his companions are freed and continue on their way. Jeff comments on the bold courage of Paul to face such persecution with steadfastness and asks whether we are striving to be so stalwart.

Paul heads to Thessalonica and preaches first in the synagogue, a common practice of his, but the Jews there refuse to listen to him and instead bring him to the magistrates, claiming that he has been "creating a disturbance all over the world" (Acts 17:6). Jeff remarks that considering he had no "information superhighway" and no real form of mass communication, Paul's reach was really quite amazing, and can only be attributed to the Holy Spirit. Paul and his troupe continue to Beroea, where the Jews listen to Paul,

and, being very educated, check his words against the Hebrew Scriptures and find them accurate. Paul arrives in Athens and goes into the market squares, which were meeting places to exchange ideas. He debates there so well that he is brought to the famous Areopagus (also known as Mars Hill) to speak to the elite of the city. Jeff relates these places and exchange of ideas to a modern talk-show to which Paul has been invited as a guest. Paul opens his speech by noting that the Athenians are very religious and even acknowledge an “unknown god” in their temples (Acts 17:23). He goes on to explain that this unknown god is in fact, the One, True God who sent His Son for our salvation. Jeff comments on Paul's method of missionary preaching: he first acknowledges that his audience is hungry for truth, then uses what they already know (that there is a god they do not yet know) and builds on it with the Gospel message. Jeff refers to the Catechism, noting that people can come to know God in many ways (CCC 31-50).

Paul's final stop on this second journey is in Corinth, where he spends six months. He lives with a couple named Priscilla and Aquila, fellow tent-makers, like himself, and also scholars and teachers. They will eventually teach a man named Apollos, who becomes a great proponent of Christianity and himself a teacher. Paul begins, as is his custom, by speaking to the Jews, but when they adamantly refuse him, he decides to focus solely on the Gentiles. He builds a community there that will face formidable obstacles: Corinth at that time was a hotbed of the most ribald forms of paganism. In fact, at that time, to be called “a Corinthian” was synonymous with loose-living. Paul's later letters to Corinth will exhort them to resist the temptations of the pagan culture around them and focus on true worship and real love. Jeff uses this opportunity to encourage his listeners to read the Epistles with their original audience in mind, relating them to the corresponding order in Acts.

After returning again to Antioch for some time, Paul sets out on his third missionary journey. This time, he goes to Asia Minor, including Galatia, Phrygia, and Ephesus. He spends three years in Ephesus, teaching and healing. So great are the works God performs through Paul that even cloths that have touched him have healing power (Acts 19:12). The epistle Paul will write to the Ephesians points out that the main problem the Christian community in Ephesus faces is spiritual combat. Jeff observes that in the Book of Revelation, Jesus says to the Ephesians that they “have lost the love [they] had at first.” He tells them to “Repent, and do the works you did at first” (Revelation 2:4-5). Jeff notes that the city of Ephesus was once a great port city, but had to be continually dredged of the silt it accumulated. At some point, the city stopped dredging, the harbors filled, and the city's ruins now stand three miles inland from the sea. Had the city continued to do those things it did at first, it might perhaps still be a great port city. Perhaps the Christian community at Ephesus, too, was in need of doing the things it did at its forming to combat the assaults to Gospel-living it was confronted with. Paul bids farewell to the Ephesian community at a town called Miletus, where he gives a speech hinting at what is in store for him. Paul senses that the Holy Spirit is leading him towards imprisonment in Jerusalem (and apparently has realized this for some time), yet he is not afraid to go there (Acts 20:22-24). On his way to Jerusalem, he is met by a prophet named Agabus, who takes Paul's belt, binds his own hands and feet with it, and

pronounces that the owner of the belt will be thus bound by the Jews in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles. Even at this, Paul does not hesitate, but continues on toward whatever God has planned for him, trusting God and choosing to carry his cross after Jesus.

Paul is, indeed, arrested in Jerusalem during Pentecost, under the charge of bringing Gentiles into the sacred places of the Temple. (Paul's arrest is reminiscent of both Peter's and Jesus' arrests). Paul gives his testimony before the crowd, a moving review of his own history and of the salvation offered by Jesus Christ. Jeff points out that this speech is a good one to take note of and use as a template for sharing one's own testimony with people. Because of Paul's Roman citizenship, he is placed under house arrest in Caesarea for two years and is brought before several rulers before he appeals to Caesar and is sent to Rome. On the way to Rome, Paul survives a shipwreck and finds himself on Malta, where he remains faithful to God and takes care of the people there, healing their sick and taking care of the shipwreck survivors. When Paul is bitten by a viper, the people think he is a murderer, but when he survives, they believe him a god (Jeff observes the fickleness of people; we form and switch our opinions so readily!). When at last he reaches Rome, he is placed under house arrest for two years, continuing to preach to all who come to him. Jeff makes two points about Paul in Rome: 1) In the Old Testament Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream that Daniel interprets. The interpretation is that there will be succeeding kingdoms to Babylon, but they will all be destroyed by the kingdom that God sets up, and this kingdom shall last forever (Daniel 2: 31-45). Many scholars believe the last of these kingdoms in the dream is Rome, and Jeff theorizes that Paul must've understood this vision and wanted to be part of the spread of the Kingdom of God, which would topple the Romans—was this why going to Rome became such a focus for Paul? 2) How did Paul accomplish all that God gave him to do? In the Letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes that God tells him God's grace is sufficient for Paul in his weakness, and Paul is able to write, "When I am weak, then I am strong," relying on God's strength alone (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

The Book of Acts ends with Paul still under arrest in Rome, and we are left wanting the rest of the story. Jeff observes that we are the end of the story—it is our turn to carry the torch and spread the Gospel message wherever we are and wherever God leads us. Jeff closes the session by noting that the Apostles gave everything for Christ, giving their lives freely because they knew death is not the end. Paul would end up being beheaded in Rome because of a fire blamed on the Christians. Peter would also be martyred in Rome, sentenced to crucifixion, but insisting on being crucified upside-down because he was not worthy to die like Jesus. The other Apostles, with the exception of John, all faced martyrdom as well. John, too, faced persecution—he was banished to the island of Patmos after surviving being boiled in oil. Clearly, following in Jesus' footsteps required a giving of their all, yet they were happy to do so, joyous even. Jeff leaves us with these questions: Can we, too, find the strength to spread the Good News? Can we, too, find the joy in following Jesus?