



**Christian Reflection**  
A Series in Faith and Ethics

**Christian Reflection**  
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## Study Guides for

# Book of Acts

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore the Acts of the Apostles as a theological treasure that can shape our discipleship today. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

### A Spirituality of Acts 2

The book of Acts is focused on God's mission, as God draws people into his orbit and brings them into his community, and so its spirituality is missional. God takes the initiative using a variety of creative means, and people respond in community to the awesome God who makes himself known in Jesus and by the Spirit.

### Reading Acts as a Sequel to the Fourfold Gospel 4

The book of Acts was intended to be a sequel to a plurality of Gospels, which Luke refers to as "many." Thus, to read Acts for all it's worth, it is necessary to attend to the connections not only with Luke's Gospel, but also with those other narratives that recount the story of Jesus echoed in Acts.

### Paul and the Philosophers 6

Paul's speech to the Areopagus Council is a paradigm for "cross-worldview" evangelism. He restates the good news in terms that maintain common ground where a similiarity of viewpoints is at hand, but retains the distinctiveness of his message on points that allow for no compromise.

### Warning to the Wise: Learning from Eutyclus's Mistake 8

The downfall of Eutyclus is, to modern ears, a strange story. (We are more likely to criticize Paul's long-winded preaching than the youthful listener who dozes off.) But the story offered moral guidance to ancient readers, exhorting them to learn from Eutyclus's youthful mistakes and to avoid spiritual laxity at all costs.

### Philanthropy, Hospitality, and Friendship 10

The story of Paul's sea-voyage to Rome – with a violent storm, shipwreck, and adventures on Malta – provides not only a glimpse of Paul as one who was open to fresh encounters with all peoples but also, surprisingly, a lasting impression of Gentiles as receptive, friendly, and hospitable.



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### Focus Article:

📖 A Spirituality of Acts  
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 11-18)

### Suggested Articles:

📖 Repeition for a Reason  
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 73-77)

### What do you think?

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# A Spirituality of Acts

The book of Acts focuses on God's mission, as God draws people into his orbit and brings them into his community, and so its spirituality is missional. God takes the initiative using a variety of creative means, and people respond in community to the awesome God who makes himself known in Jesus and by the Spirit.

### Prayer

Lord you have laid down your life for us, and call us to lay down our lives for one another.

Grant us eyes to see the needs of those around us, discipline to restrain our own greed for time or possessions so that we can share with our neighbors, and joy as we serve alongside one another as your Church.

Prosper the work of our hands Lord, and let your kingdom come.  
Amen

### Scripture Reading: Acts 1:1-8

### Reflection

In Acts, the human encounter with God, which is the heart of what Steve Walton means by "spirituality," is turned outward, not inward. "We find little description or discussion of believers' inner lives," Walton notes. Rather, "the accent is on what God is doing: humans are to look for what God is doing and to join in."

He traces the contours of spirituality in Acts, beginning with the agents and means that God uses to move toward humans.

- ▶ *God engages humans directly through the persons of the exalted Jesus and the Holy Spirit.* Jesus does not disappear from Acts after he ascends to the Father (Acts 1:9-11); rather he reigns at God's right hand and is rightfully called "Lord" (2:33, 36). Walton notes, "He now pours out the Spirit, something that Yahweh, and Yahweh alone, does in previous times. To encounter Jesus is to encounter the God of Israel." Jesus leads the believing community at key moments: he appears to the martyr Stephen in a vision (7:55-58), confronts Saul (9:4-5), guides Ananias to baptize and heal Saul (9:10-16), heals Aeneas (9:34; cf. 3:6, 16; 4:7, 17, 30) and, as disciples call on his name, drives out evil spirits (16:18; cf. comically, 19:11-17).

Through the Holy Spirit, God engages humans through visions and dreams (e.g., Acts 7:55; cf. 2:17), direct instruction (e.g., 8:29, 39; 10:19-20; 11:28), charismatic discernment (e.g., 6:3, 5), charismatic praise (e.g., 2:4, 11b), and charismatic preaching and teaching (e.g., 2:14-36; 4:8-12, 29-31).

- ▶ *God guides humans through divine messengers, whom Luke calls "angels."* Through the word of an angel, God sends Philip to lead the Ethiopian eunuch to faith (Acts 8:26), instructs Cornelius to send for Peter who will lead his household to faith (10:3-6), and assures Paul that he will survive the sea storm in order to bear witness before Caesar (27:23-24). "Angels also *act* in space and time," Walton observes. "Peter is freed from prison twice through angelic intervention (5:19; 12:7-11)...to continue his mission work."
- ▶ *God employs various means to engage people in the book of Acts, but four are striking: visions and dreams, Scripture interpreted in light*



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of Jesus, the “word of the Lord [or God],” and the name of Jesus. Though the instances of their use in Acts may be dramatic, Walton says each means “resonates with Christian experience through the centuries, including today.”

So, if this is how God engages with humans, how do they respond to the divine initiatives? The human response tends to be:

- ▶ *slow and partial*. For example, even Philip and Peter must be nudged to approach Gentiles (Acts 8:29, 10:19-20). Other believers must be convinced (11:3-18) and their leaders debate how to proceed (15:1-29). Years later, false rumors of Paul’s stance toward Gentiles start the events leading to his imprisonment (21:20-36). “Luke’s realistic portrayal of the slowness of religious people to change...presents no picture of unhindered progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, but rather believers’ mixed response to God, warts and all.”
- ▶ *community-centered*. All of the activities of the believers’ meetings – the apostles’ teaching, fellowship and sharing goods, prayers, and breaking bread – are expressed with plural verbs in Acts 2:42-47.
- ▶ *saturated with prayer* – usually in community (Acts 1:14 [cf. 1:4-5]; 1:24; 13:2-3), but also in individual piety (10:2, 4; 9:11).
- ▶ *in the context of human suffering*. Believers “do not see persecution as showing that they are getting things wrong, but as a call to seek God’s power and boldness,” Walton writes. “They do not pray for deliverance from persecution, but for God’s strength and grace in persecution (Acts 4:29-31).
- ▶ *characterized by fear*, or awe, whenever believers recognize God’s greatness (Acts 2:43; cf. 5:5, 11; 9:31; and 19:17).

Walton concludes, “Acts portrays God – Father, Son, and Spirit – as actively engaged in the world, seeking humans to join in their mission. God is the initiator and driver of this mission, and its key end – for it is through the mission that people encounter God-in-Christ by the Spirit, and are being transformed into the people God calls them to be.”

### Study Questions

1. Through what *agents* does God engage humans in the book of Acts? Does God continue to engage people today through these agents?
2. Discuss the four *means* that God employs to engage humans in Acts. How, and to what degree, are each of these evident within your congregation and in your experience?
3. Consider the five major features of people’s *response* to God in the book of Acts. In your experience, how do these characterize the response of believers today?
4. In the three versions of Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road (9:1-9; 22:3-11; 26:4-20), what elements of the spirituality outlined here are prominent?
5. How do the three versions of the Damascus road experience differ? Why, according to Timothy Churchill, does Luke draw attention to this event with such repetition?

Departing Hymn: ‘As Christ and Church and Congregation’



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### Focus Article:

- 📖 Reading Acts as a Sequel to the Fourfold Gospel  
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 19-26)

### Suggested Articles:

- 📖 A Story that Teaches: The Theology of Acts  
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 82-87)
- 📖 Studying The Book of Acts  
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 88-93)

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# Reading Acts as a Sequel to the Fourfold Gospel

The Acts of the Apostles was intended to be a sequel to a plurality of Gospels, which Luke refers to as “many” (Luke 1:1). Thus, to read Acts for all it’s worth, it is necessary to attend to the connections not only with Luke’s Gospel, but also with those other narratives that recount the story of Jesus echoed in Acts.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 9:36-10:33

### Reflection

Contemporary scholars often talk about “Luke-Acts,” but curiously in the New Testament canon or order of books, Acts is not paired with its companion volume, the Gospel of Luke. Instead, it occupies a unique position as a hinge between the four Gospels and all the other writings. (In the West, Paul’s letters follow Acts; in Eastern traditions, the Catholic Epistles come after Acts.)

How seriously should we take Acts’ location in the canon after the Gospels? “Its placement there may well reflect the intentions of the author,” Mikeal Parsons suggests. “That is to say, the Acts of the Apostles was conceived and intended to be read and heard as a sequel to a plurality of Gospels...which, by the time of Acts’ publication, included Mark, Matthew, and possibly John (and may have included at one point or another, some now non-extant or partially preserved Gospels).” He compares this relationship to an artist’s diptych, or two images on a hinged tablet: on one panel is the book of Acts, and on the other are the Gospel writers, with Luke depicted larger than the rest, as “the first among equals.” The image on each panel helps us interpret the other: the Gospels shed light on the stories in Acts, which in turn serve to parallel, clarify, or extend the arguments of the Gospels.

To illustrate the value of reading Acts in light of the fourfold Gospel, Parsons traces some “verbal links and/or conceptual connections to material in Matthew and/or Mark (but not in the Third Gospel).” For example, in the stories in Acts 9:36-10:33 Parsons identifies the following connections.

- ▶ *The resuscitation of Tabitha echoes Jesus’ healing miracle.* The parallels with Jesus’ resuscitation of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:22-24, 35-43 // Luke 8:41-42, 49-56) are striking. When Peter commands “Tabitha, get up” (Acts 9:40), listeners familiar with Mark’s Gospel will remember Jesus’ words in Mark 5:41 (but missing from Luke), “Talitha [now Tabitha] cumi.” Yet, as Parson observes, “there is an important difference: Peter’s miracle is not a result of his own power, a point indicated by the fact he prayed to the deity.”
- ▶ *Peter’s vision echoes Jesus’ teaching about clean and unclean foods.* When Peter sees a sheet with all kinds of animals on it and is commanded to eat them, he refuses because some are “unclean.” Listeners will recall Jesus’ teaching in Mark 7:14-23 (cf. Matthew 15:15-20, but not in Luke). There, Jesus explains his parable – “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” – to his disciples, and specifically Peter





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(Matthew 15:15). “Peter evidently failed to understand the first time around,” Parson notes. “Peter is presented as undergoing a conversion no less radical than Cornelius’s. He is led to confess, ‘I truly come to understand that God does not show favoritism. Rather, in every nation, the one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’ (Acts 10:34-35), and later, at the Apostolic Council, he proclaims that God ‘made no distinction between them [the Gentiles] and us regarding our faith, but cleansed their hearts (as well as ours)’ (Acts 15:9). The allusion to Mark 7, which implies that Peter has not understood (or heeded?) Jesus’ proclamation that all foods are clean, deepens and enriches Acts’ presentation of Peter’s ‘conversion’ to a more inclusive attitude regarding first food then people.”

Parsons concludes from such examples that Luke wrote Acts not only as a sequel to Luke, which provided his literary plot and theological themes, but also “as a sequel to the multiform Gospel in which he occasionally picked up on a literary thread or theological theme missing in the Third Gospel, either because at that point it did not serve his purposes or because at that time he was unacquainted with the writing that contained it.”

### Study Questions

1. What do the stories in Acts 9:36-10:33 teach us about Peter’s discipleship? About our own? How are these teachings developed by the links between Acts and Mark’s Gospel?
2. How do other non-Lucan links in Acts serve to parallel (Acts 14:21; 20:10), clarify (Acts 19:7), or extend (Acts 12:2) the argument of the material in Matthew and/or Mark?
3. Briefly summarize Mikeal Parsons’s evidence that from the beginning Luke and Acts circulated independently. How does this bear on his view that Acts “*was conceived and intended to be read and heard as a sequel to a plurality of Gospels.*”

### Departing Hymn: “All Hail the Power of Jesus Name”

All hail the power of Jesus’ name!  
Let angels prostrate fall;  
bring forth the royal diadem,  
and crown him Lord of all.

Ye chosen seed of Israel’s race,  
ye ransomed from the fall,  
hail him who saves you by his grace,  
and crown him Lord of all.

Let every kindred, every tribe  
on this terrestrial ball,  
to him all majesty ascribe,  
and crown him Lord of all.

O that with yonder sacred throng  
we at his feet may fall!  
we’ll join the everlasting song,  
and crown him Lord of all.

Vv. 1-3, *Edward Perronet* (1780), alt.; v. 4, *John Rippon* (1787)

*Suggested Tunes:* ST. ANNE (Croft) or MCKEE



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### Focus Article:

📖 Paul and the Philosophers  
*(The Book of Acts, pp. 27-34)*

### Suggested Article:

📖 Spreading the Gospel  
"To the Ends of the Earth"  
*(The Book of Acts, pp. 46-54)*

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# Paul and the Philosophers

Paul's speech to the Areopagus Council is a paradigm for "cross-worldview" evangelism. He restates the good news in terms that maintain common ground where a similarity of viewpoints is at hand, but retains the distinctiveness of his message on points that allow for no compromise.

### Prayer

We want to make every thought captive to you, Lord,  
**but too often we bow before idols of our own making.**  
We want to proclaim with our lips, "Christ is Risen!"  
**but too often we wait to utter those words in the safe haven of your Church, and hesitate to bear witness to you in the world.**  
We want to be known as Christians by our love,  
**but too often we fail to love our neighbors as ourselves.**  
Lord, by your grace, may we not be ruled by our fears or our passions; may our minds be fixed on the things above.  
**Amen.**

### Scripture Reading: Acts 17:16-34

### Reflection

The Apostle Paul had never seen anything like Athens: "the city was full of idols." When some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers took him before the city's governing council to hash out his complaints about this, the assembly (like the promontory on which it gathered) was named "Areopagus" – the hill of the god of war, Ares (or Mars). You get the picture: there were ancient idols or references to them in every direction.

Instead of ranting on about the idols or mocking his audience for honoring them, Paul adopted a winsome tone in his speech. Tim Brookins finds much to admire in the Apostle's approach.

- ▶ *Paul compliments his listeners and seeks common ground with them.* There is no sarcasm in his introduction: "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are." Paul seizes upon their altar inscribed "To an unknown God," and identifies this figure with the God whom he preaches. Brookins notes, "For the moment Paul highlights what they have in common and pushes their differences into the background." Indeed, the many claims about God that follow (17:24-30) chart even more common ground. "Only at this point does Paul say something that an average Greek listener might have found unusual: this God has appointed a day of judgment, to be executed by the (unnamed) man whom he has designated, and whom he has raised from the dead as proof (17:31)."
- ▶ *Rather than quote Scripture, Paul carefully cites commonplace themes.* When Jewish figures are alluded to, Paul does not name them explicitly (cf. 17:26, 31). While his philosophical quotations (17:28) would please the Stoics much more than the Epicureans – rarely does an argument appeal to everyone – they are more intelligible to the pagan audience than Scripture passages would be. Even here (as we'll see), Paul reinterprets these quotations in light of the biblical narrative.



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► *Paul draws his listeners into the biblical framework.* “Deep-structure differences from Stoicism are evident at every turn,” Brookins says. So, for Paul the unity of the human race (17:26, 29) comes from our common descent from one *man*, Adam, who reflects (rather than replicates) the Creator’s glory. This departs radically from the Stoic view that humans descend from *stars*, which are divine bodies that together comprise God (or Zeus). God’s nearness to us (17:27, 28) is not due to us being divine fragments, but because God sustains our lives and cares for us. For Stoics, the “times of human ignorance” (17:30) would refer only to the temporary state of childhood; Paul also, and especially, has in mind the Jewish idea of God’s self-revelation unfolding in history.

Paul veers further from the Stoics. They said the universe has no beginning and endlessly repeats its natural cycles. Paul deploys a Jewish linear view of time: it has a beginning and is moving toward a goal of divine judgment. “Popular Greek thinking left room, at most, for a final judgment according to works,” Brookins notes. “But Paul has much more than this in view: there will be an *appointed* day of judgment for all of creation at once, and a divinely-appointed *agent* of judgment who was *resurrected* from the dead. The Greeks believed in none of these things, least of all resurrection.”

► *Paul clarifies essential points of difference.* Why does the Apostle make such controversial claims about the coming time of judgment and Christ’s resurrection at the end of his speech? Brookins thinks that while “Paul was happy to use the words and ideas of the surrounding culture as a point of departure, he was also unwilling to keep essential points of contrast concealed, despite knowing full well the potential consequences of revealing them. The audience response to his approach was mixed at best—‘some scoffed; but others said “We will hear you again about this”’ while ‘some joined him and became believers’ (17:32, 34). To the extent that this response constitutes a ‘failure,’ it presents us with a kind of failure that we could afford to emulate more often.”

### Study Questions

1. How would you characterize Paul’s approach to communicating the gospel in the pagan culture of Athens? What are the advantages of his approach? What are some dangers of miscommunication, and how does Paul deal with them?
2. Have you talked about your faith and discipleship with persons who know little about the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity? If so, compare your experience with Paul’s. What can you learn from his approach in the Areopagus speech?
3. How does Raphael depict Paul’s confrontation with idolatry in *Paul Preaching in Athens*? How did this tapestry’s original placement in the Sistine Chapel reinforce its message?
4. How does Terry York describe sharing the gospel with a new culture in his hymn “As Christ and Church and Congregation”? What themes from Paul’s speech to the Areopagus Council are reflected in this hymn text?

Departing Hymn: “As Christ and Church and Congregation”



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### Focus Article:

📖 Warning to the Wise:  
Learning from Eutychus's  
Mistake  
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 57-64)

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# Warning to the Wise:

## Learning from Eutychus's Mistake

The downfall of Eutychus is, to modern ears, a strange story. (We are more likely to criticize Paul's long-winded preaching than the youthful listener who dozes off.) How did the story offer moral guidance to ancient readers, exhorting them to learn from Eutychus's mistakes and avoid spiritual laxity at all costs?

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 20:7-12

### Reflection

Ancient readers probably interpreted poor Eutychus's dozing off in two ways: not only as literal, physiological sleep coming on a tired young man, but also as a metaphor for his irresponsible behavior. Andrew Arterbury explains, "A variety of thematic elements, verbal repetitions, and narrative clues in other Lukan passages support a negative portrait of Eutychus's fall and a positive portrait of Paul's actions in the story."

Arterbury identifies four themes in the overarching narratives of Luke and Acts that help us interpret this story about Eutychus as Luke's earliest readers would have.

- ▶ *Miraculous resuscitations of the dead* are rare in the Bible, but Luke describes three (of the five occasions): Jesus raising a widow's son (Luke 7:11-17), Peter raising Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42), and Paul raising Eutychus. The Lukan parallels suggest the apostles are faithfully "carrying on the work of Jesus after his death, and Jesus' spirit is at work in them."
- ▶ *The setting of an upper room* for worship "connotes a context of intimacy and sincere discipleship," Arterbury writes. In such a location, Jesus dines with his disciples on the night of his arrest (Luke 22:7-38); the disciples gather to await the arrival of God's Spirit (Acts 1:13-14); and Peter resuscitates Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42). And, thus, it is foreboding when a disciple leaves an upper room (cf. Judas in Luke 22:3-6, 47-48).
- ▶ *Their faithful worship of God* shows the Christians in Troas are in the line of authentic believers. Each mark of discipleship in Acts 2:42-43 (except prayer) explicitly appears in the story. The imagery of their lamps is significant: though it grows dark outside, they are prepared to continue in the light for an entire evening of worship and communion.
- ▶ *Sleep, night, and darkness* take on negative connotations here, as they often do in Luke's writings. Only Luke tells us that Peter, James, and John fell asleep during the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). None of the disciples stay awake with Jesus on the Mount of Olives (22:39-46), and Jesus associates the arresting mob there with "the power of darkness" (22:53).  
But it is not always so. When angels herald Jesus' birth in the night, the vigilant shepherds hear them and respond (Luke 2:8-20); the prophet Anna worships continuously in the temple, day and night (2:37); and Jesus prays through the night before he selects the





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apostles (6:12). Arterbury explains, "On occasion, God's will is fully realized during the nighttime hours, but only those who are awake and alert recognize and/or participate in God's will." Indeed, Jesus is a model, in both his behavior and teaching (cf. 21:34-36), for remaining alert for God's decisive work in the world.

Arterbury sees a pattern in Luke's Gospel: beginning with profound examples of vigilance (in the shepherds and Anna), and frequently describing Jesus in communion with God through the night hours, Luke then shows how the disciples repeatedly fail to be vigilant, but rather fall asleep precisely when God is active. However, this pattern is reversed in Acts after the Holy Spirit comes upon them: Peter is easily wakened by an angel, who guides him past the sleeping prison guards (Acts 12:1-17); church members have prayed through the night for Peter's deliverance (12:5, 12); Paul is guided by a nighttime vision of a Macedonian man (16:9-10); and when Paul and Silas are imprisoned, at midnight they are not sleeping, but "praying and singing hymns to God" (16:25), which leaves them ready to witness the miraculous earthquake that frees them and brings their jailer to faith in Christ.

"Just as we are tempted to begin reading the story of the early Christians in Acts too triumphantly, we encounter a horrible mistake," Arterbury concludes. "Eutychus is not alert to the work of God. Instead, when he falls asleep, he also falls away from the worshipping community, into the darkness, and down three flights to the ground resulting in death." Eutychus's name means "the lucky one," and he is fortunate that through Paul, God graciously reverses the natural results of his spiritual laxity.

### Study Questions

1. Review the marks of ideal discipleship in Acts 2:42-43. How are they present among the Christians in Troas?
2. Why do you think Luke decided to include this story about Eutychus at the end of Paul's missionary journeys?
3. What does the metaphor of remaining prepared for God's working in the world, even through the night, mean for you?
4. Have there been times when, due to spiritual laxity, you have missed God's working in your life, a friend or family member's life, or in your congregation? What are the times and sources of spiritual laxity in your discipleship?

### Departing Hymn: "On the Wings of Light Declining"

On the wings of light declining  
sinks the westering sun to sleep:  
Lord, alike in dark or shining,  
thy pure eyes their vigil keep.  
Let thy light, which faileth never,  
round me shine, though day depart;  
and, though night prevaleth, ever  
flood the chambers of my heart.

*Páll Jónsson (1889), translated from Icelandic by Charles Venn Pilcher (1913)*  
*Suggested Tunes: PLEADING SAVIOR or RUSTINGTON*



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### Focus Articles:

- 📖 Philanthropy, Hospitality, and Friendship  
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 65-72)

### Suggested Article:

- 📖 The Ever-Expanding Gospel  
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 78-81)

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# Philanthropy, Hospitality, and Friendship

The story of Paul's sea-voyage to Rome – with a violent storm, shipwreck, and adventures on Malta – provides not only a glimpse of Paul as one who was open to fresh encounters with all peoples but also, surprisingly, a lasting impression of Gentiles as receptive, friendly, and hospitable.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 27:1-28:10

### Reflection

"The subject matter of the book of Acts is the living God as revealed," Joshua Jipp observes. So, as it is giving us "a historical explanation for the expansion of the Church and its transformation into a multiethnic institution," Acts is also making claims on us "about who the living God is, how God is known, and the kinds of people the Church of the living God ought to be."

What, then, should we take from the lengthy story of Paul's voyage to Rome? What does it reveal about God and our discipleship? To answer these questions, Jipp focuses on Paul's dealings with several figures who are not in the Christian movement. Ancient writers often used sea-adventures and encounters with exotic people to delineate a hero's character and destiny. That is what Luke is doing in this story of Paul's return (after a six-chapter absence) to a Gentile setting: "Three distinct interactions between Paul and Gentile characters provide a window into the lasting impression of Paul that Luke wishes to leave his readers."

- ▶ *Julius, the Roman Centurion*, might have been stereotyped by readers as "violent, brutish, or greedy," Jipp notes, but Luke portrays him in a "glowingly positive" way. Julius displays philanthropy by allowing Paul to gather with friends (Acts 27:3), and later saves Paul's life (27:43). "Philanthropy – often translated as kindness, love for humanity, or generosity – was considered to be one of the premier Hellenistic virtues and was often associated with the making and maintenance of friendships through acts of mercy, kindness, hospitality, and clemency." We do not know this centurion's motivation, but his acts of mercy toward the vulnerable are startling.
- ▶ *Paul's shipmates* are saved on three occasions by the apostle's prophecies, exhortations, and encouragement. First, Paul prophecies about the danger of continuing the sea journey (27:9-11), which is realized when a typhoon almost sinks the ship (27:18-20). Then, when everyone onboard has lost hope, Paul encourages them with the angel's message that they will make it safely to Rome (27:20-26). He also advises the centurion to keep the fearful sailors on the ship (27:30-32). Jipp explains, "On six occasions Luke uses forms of 'to save' in order to refer to the salvation or safety of the shipmates and Paul (27:20, 31, 34, 43, 44; 28:1), and given that one of Luke's primary themes is God's salvation for all people, it may be that Luke intends the reader to view God's rescue of the crew through Paul as a metaphor for the salvation of the Gentiles." Finally, Paul



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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hosts a salvific meal for everyone onboard (27:33-38), which echoes Jesus' meals with all people in the Gospel of Luke (e.g., Luke 9:11-17; 22:14-23; 24:28-35).

- ▶ *The Maltese islanders* offer remarkable hospitality to Paul. These "natives" (or, barbarians) might have threatened the shipwrecked strangers, but instead they show "unusual kindness" (or, philanthropy) by building a fire to keep the prisoners warm (28:2). Their leader, Publius, shows more hospitality after Paul survives the viper's attack. Paul reciprocates by healing Publius's father and others who are sick. The Maltese cement their relationship with Paul by giving the provisions for the rest of his voyage.

Jipp concludes, "Luke leaves his readers with a portrait of Paul as entering into host and guest relationships with outsiders as a means of extending God's salvation to all people. Luke seems, in fact, to make a point of invoking cultural stereotypes (of Roman centurions, prisoners, and barbarians) only to overturn them – namely, to show that these are the people to whom God's salvation has and will extend and that they are not only worthy of receiving but are supremely capable of practicing and initiating friendship, hospitality, and philanthropy."

### Study Questions

1. Identify the examples of philanthropy, hospitality, and friendship in the story of Paul's sea-voyage to Rome. How are these three virtues connected to one another in the story?
2. How does Luke surprise readers with the character traits of the Gentiles in the story? Why would he do this?
3. What admirable traits does Paul exhibit in this story? How is the apostle most like God in Christ?
4. How does your congregation give and receive philanthropy, hospitality, and friendship with people who do not belong to the Christian movement? What insights about these virtues can you glean from this story?
5. "Acts re-calls us to a radically selfless gospel whose mission is to reach the ends of the earth at any and all personal cost," Chad Hartsock writes. "It reminds us that the 'ends of the earth' can be in a land far away, or among the socially marginalized neighbors who live in our shadows every moment." Discuss his observation in light of this story.

### Departing Hymn: "Day by Day, and with Each Passing Moment" (v. 1a, 3b)

Day by day and with each passing moment,  
strength we find to meet our trials here;  
trusting in our Father's wise bestowment,  
we've no cause for worry or for fear.

Help us, Lord, when toil and trouble meeting,  
e're to take, as from a father's hand,  
one by one, the days, the moments fleeting,  
till we reach the promised land.

Caroline V. Sandell-Berg (1865); translated by A. L. Skoog, alt.  
Tune: BLOTT EN DAG

# Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.



# A Spirituality of Acts

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Acts 1:1-8	Acts 9:1-9
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Survey major features of spirituality in Acts	Relate those features to three versions of Paul's Damascus road event
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To outline three key elements of the spirituality of Acts: the agents and means of God's approach to humans, and the major features of people's response to those initiatives.
2. To examine the spirituality of our congregations for these three key elements.
3. To trace these three key elements of spirituality in the story of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Book of Acts (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Question

What comes to mind when you hear the word 'spirituality'?

Steve Walton admits it is 'a vague and imprecise term.' Today, some use 'spirituality' to mean the opposite of (organized) religion, as when they say 'I'm spiritual, but not religious.' A wide range of experiences, practices, and beliefs have been called 'spiritual.'

Walton does not dismiss the term because it is vague, but defines it carefully to point to an important dimension of the book of Acts. He explains, 'This dimension is vital to understanding earliest Christianity: it is all too easy to treat the Christian faith as either a set of intellectual beliefs or a series of ethical demands, and thus miss its crucial dimension of engagement with and experience of God as known in Jesus and by the Spirit. The content of Christian belief is important, of course, and so is the lifestyle that goes with following Jesus, but both of these flow from and articulate the reality of Christian encounter with God—and the book of Acts is full of such encounters. So that is where we shall focus, on what Stephen Barton calls 'the sense of the divine presence and living in the light of that presence.'" (*The Book of Acts*, p. 11)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 8:1-8 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

How we experience God and engage with God's work today is what Steve Walton means by our "spirituality." In this study we follow his lead in tracing the spirituality of the book of Acts, and use its elements—the agents and means that God uses to approach humans, and the response they make—to examine our own spirituality.

If the group would like to extend this study, schedule a second session to examine the story of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. In that story most of the key elements of the spirituality of Acts are highlighted and integrated with one another.

### *Study Questions*

1. The *agents* through whom God engages humans in the book of Acts are the exalted Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and angels. In the first two cases, Steve Walton notes, God is acting as his own agent; in the latter case, God uses the divine messengers whom Luke calls "angels." The agency of the Holy Spirit in Acts is better known, but readers may overlook the agency of the exalted Jesus. Walton explains, "Some claim that Jesus disappears from the scene when he ascends to the Father (Acts 1:9-11), and that the Holy Spirit is his *alter ego* who acts in Jesus' place—something like Batman acting for Bruce Wayne. This misunderstands both the present place of Jesus and the narrative of Acts."

Create three small groups to review how each of these agents advances God's mission in Acts, and to look for parallels in their experience and the Church today. So, the first group might discuss whether Jesus appears to people today, or heals people through his name; the second group might explore the range of charismatic activity attributed to the Holy Spirit today; and the third group will need to discuss the appearance of divine messengers.

2. Walton identifies these four *means*: visions and dreams, Scripture interpreted in light of Jesus, the "word of the Lord (or God)" [which is the gospel message], and the name of Jesus. Assign small groups to research some of the scripture passages that Walton cites for each means. Encourage them to look for parallels in their experience and the Church today. Are all of the means evident today? Which ones have been most prominent in their experience? Are there other important means of God's activity?
3. Walton notes that people's *response* to God in the book of Acts is slow and partial (as illustrated by their adjusting to God's work among Gentiles), community-centered, saturated by prayer, characterized by recognizing suffering to be endured, and filled with fear and awe. Compare this to people's response to God today. Is this how members would describe their own response, or the response of other Christians they know? If not, are there other patterns of response today that seem to be missing in Acts? How do members explain the difference?
4. Briefly summarize the *agents* and *means* of God's approach to humans, and the patterns of human *response* in the book of Acts. (This summary is especially important if you have extended the discussion to a second session.) Form three small groups to map these elements of spirituality onto each version of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road (9:1-9; 22:3-11; 26:4-20).
5. Form three small groups to trace each of these three changes across the versions of the Damascus road event: (1) the accounts of Paul's pre-encounter persecution of believers grows in detail and intensity; (2) the accounts of the heavenly light say it is more bright, is seen by more people, and elicits more response from them; and (3) the reports of Jesus' message to Paul become increasingly detailed. These enlargements of the story, as well as the increasing frequency with which it is repeated near the end of the narrative, indicate it is very significant for Luke.

Timothy Churchill suggests Luke is highlighting Jesus' message, which (1) establishes that Paul's apostolic authority comes straight from Jesus, (2) expresses the gospel in kernel form ("to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me"), and (3) reflects a high Christology that identifies Jesus with God.

### *Departing Hymn*

"As Christ and Church and Congregation" is on pp. 35-37 of *The Book of Acts*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Reading Acts as a Sequel to the Fourfold Gospel

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To see how Luke links stories in the book of Acts to narratives about Jesus in non-Lucan gospels, especially Matthew and Mark.
2. To focus on the central character of Peter in the book of Acts.
3. To consider how the book of Acts is related to the Gospel of Luke and to other early narratives about Jesus.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Book of Acts (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “All Hail the Power of Jesus Name” locate one of the familiar tunes ST. ANNE or MCKEE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Question

“How do stories teach us?” Holly Beers asks. “It is one thing to insist, as the Church often has, that the story narrated in the book of Acts teaches us; it is quite another to explain exactly how this teaching is done.”

Academics used to draw a hard distinction between the descriptive and prescriptive, or narrative and instructional parts of the New Testament, and then they prioritized the latter. More recent literary-theological investigations (like the one by Mikeal Parsons in this study) show why this is “unhelpful,” Beers continues. “Also by the wayside is the modernist ideal of ‘neutral’ texts; all texts have agendas. The central question, therefore, is: in the book of Acts, what is Luke’s agenda, theological and otherwise? How is he shaping that agenda through the story he tells? How is he teaching the Church, from Theophilus to today?” (*The Book of Acts*, p. 82)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will reveal new perspectives on his grace and salvation through Jesus Christ as you study the book of Acts.

## Scripture Reading

Ask two group member to read Acts 9:36-10:33 from a modern translation with the first reading the Joppa-centered events and the second reading the Caesarea-centered events in this alternating way: the first reads 9:36-43, the second reads 10:1-8, the first reads 10:9-23, and the second reads 10:24-33.

## Reflection

Learning about *how* biblical stories are told is important not only to appreciate their literary artistry, but also to understand their teachings about God and our discipleship. In this study, Mikeal Parsons examines how some stories that Luke tells in Acts draw upon and extend other stories about Jesus (not only from the four Gospels, but also from narratives that are unknown today; cf. the *agraphon*—or, a saying of Jesus not recorded in the

canonical Gospels—in Acts 20:35). This echoing of one story in another can enrich our understanding of the teaching in each story and lead us more carefully to encounter Jesus. This study of literary links between Acts and the Gospels sets the stage for two other studies in this series—“Warning to the Wise: Learning from Eutychus’s Mistake” which explores Acts 20:7-12 more fully, and “Philanthropy, Hospitality, and Friendship” which uncovers the rich teachings in Acts 27:1-28:10.

For further study in the literary artistry of the book of Acts, encourage members to examine the section-by-section commentaries that Kathy Maxwell commends in *Studying the Book of Acts*. In *A Story that Teaches: The Theology of Acts*, Holly Beers reviews three recent works that summarize and explore Luke’s theological agenda in the book of Acts.

### Study Questions

1. Peter is depicted as both very like Jesus in his concern for the suffering (in Acts 9:36-43) and struggling to understand and appropriate Jesus’ teachings about what is clean and unclean (in Acts 10:1-33). Encourage members to reflect on their own uneven understanding and halting embrace of Jesus’ way. Where do they really “get it,” and where do they lag behind in their understanding of Jesus’ teachings or draw back in their commitment to them?

Mikeal Parsons suggests the first story (of Peter resuscitating Tabitha) “parallels” the Gospel narratives, and the second story (of Peter’s vision) “extends” them. Thus, in the first story, the link emphasizes how closely Peter imitates Jesus (even in the detail of his command to the dead girl). In the second story, the link shows how Peter misunderstands or resists Jesus’ direct teaching. (Notice, in the Matthew 15:15-20 parallel, Peter is the one who seeks and receives the explanation of Jesus’ parable about the clean and unclean things.) Since Luke’s Gospel does not record this parable, the verbal link to Mark and Matthew is required to highlight the significance of Peter’s mistake.

2. Form four small groups to study the links between the following passages in Acts and the non-Lucan Gospels: *Acts 12:2* linked with Mark 10:39 // Matthew 20:23; *Acts 14:21* linked with Matthew 28:19; *Acts 19:7* linked with Mark 5:7; and *Acts 20:10* linked with Mark 5:39.

Ask the groups to highlight how the link they studied either develops a parallel with, clarifies, or extends the main point of the story in Matthew and/or Mark. How does the link help them better understand the teaching of the Acts passage?

Parsons suggests the first passage (Acts 12:2) “underscores the fact that not all of Christ’s followers are divinely rescued” as, here, one of Jesus’ inner circle is martyred, as Jesus predicted. This underscores: “The Church suffers along with its suffering Messiah.” The second passage (Acts 14:21) shows that making disciples goes beyond evangelism and baptism: the Lucan “strengthening the souls of the disciples” involves teaching them Jesus’ commandments. The third passage (Acts 19:7) clarifies that Jesus’ powerful name cannot be used in a magical way. The fourth passage (Acts 20:10) suggests that Paul’s action (like Peter’s in Acts 9:36-43) is an imitation of Jesus’ resuscitation of Jairus’s daughter. This is interesting because Paul did not know Jesus in the way that Peter did.

3. Recent studies of how ancient papyri could be lengthened have shown “there is no reason that Luke could not have written Luke/Acts on a single scroll if he had wanted.” Parsons goes on to make two points. First, in the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament (from the third to seventh centuries), Luke and Acts do not appear side-by-side. Second, the book of Acts has a very distinctive textual tradition: Acts circulated in two versions—“Alexandrian” and “Western”—unlike Luke (and the other New Testament writings).

All of the evidence is consistent with and the second line of evidence suggests that Acts circulated among churches independently of Luke’s Gospel. Surely it was clear to listeners that Acts bore a special relation in plot and theme to the Gospel of Luke (see Acts 1:1), but they might interpret the allusions in Acts to the other canonical Gospels and narratives of Jesus as Luke’s endorsement and development of those non-Lucan stories.

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.



# Paul and the Philosophers

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how Paul communicated the gospel in the pagan culture of Athens.
2. To review your personal experience of talking about faith and discipleship with persons who know little about the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Book of Acts (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with an Observation

"In many ways, the religious context North American Christians inhabit today shares less in common with the Bible Belt culture of the mid twentieth century than it does the pluralistic pagan environment in which the apostle Paul struck out to establish the world's first congregations," Tim Brookins writes. "Until recently, North American pastors could expect their pews to be lined with men and women intimately acquainted with the Bible's stories and ideas. Evangelists stood before audiences of men and women who believed in both the existence of God and the Bible's authority as a sacred text. But in the 'post-Christian' age of the present, Christians now stand, like Paul, on their own 'Areopagus' and address audiences of 'Athenians.'" (*The Book of Acts*, p. 27)

In his study of Paul's speech to the philosophers, city councilors, and others at the Areopagus, Brookins uncovers insights for our conversations about faith and discipleship and our communication of the gospel today.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 17:16-34 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

Timothy Brookins admires the rhetorical artistry of the apostolic sermons as they are presented in Acts, especially Paul's address to the Areopagus Council in Athens. In this study, Brookins identifies four features of Paul's approach to communicating the gospel to a sophisticated pagan audience: seeking common ground, working from commonplace themes, drawing the audience into the biblical framework, and clarifying essential differences between the cultural and Christian viewpoints. As members study Paul's speech (and its artistic echoes in painting and hymnody).

## Study Questions

1. Form four small groups to investigate the features of Paul's approach that Timothy Brookins identifies: (1) seeking common ground with the pagan audience, (2) working from commonplace themes rather than Biblical quotations, (3) gradually drawing the audience into the biblical framework by interpreting those common themes from the perspective of the biblical narrative, and (4) clarifying the essential differences between the audience's cultural viewpoints and the Christian perspective.

Each feature has advantages and dangers. After you discuss these features individually, consider how they work together in a speech or conversation. Are the dangers of one feature ameliorated by the use of the others? What dangers of miscommunication remain?

2. Encourage some members to share their personal experiences in talking about their faith and discipleship with persons who know little about the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity. With these contemporary examples before the group, members can compare their experiences with Paul's, draw guidance from Paul's approach, and share new insights that might deal with the dangers identified in the question above.

If members' experiences were not positive, what can they learn from Paul about faithfulness that does not expect uniform success? If members have not had personal experience, how can they be more open to opportunities to interact with and share their faith and discipleship with persons who know little about the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity?

3. Raphael's cartoon *Paul Preaching in Athens* depicts Paul addressing a small crowd, but looking over their heads toward a statue of the war-god Mars in the background. It is from that idol that the location and council drew their name, "Areopagus," or Hill of Ares (or Mars). Figures in the crowd represent the three responses identified by Luke: "some scoffed; but others said 'We will hear you again about this,'" while "some joined him and became believers" (Acts 17:32, 34).

"Very few visitors today realize that the Sistine Chapel decoration is incomplete without the tapestries" made from Raphael's cartoons, Heidi Hornik explains. The tapestry from this cartoon "was, from an iconographic perspective, appropriately placed below Cosimo Rosselli's fresco from the Moses cycle depicting the *Adoration of the Golden Calf*" to highlight Paul's deep concern about the presence of many idols in the city of Athens.

4. How does Terry York describe sharing the gospel with a new culture in his hymn "As Christ and Church and Congregation"? What themes from Paul's speech to the Areopagus Council are reflected in this hymn text?

In "As Christ and Church and Congregation," Terry York employs three images to describe sharing the gospel with a new culture: it is like Christ walking free in the new space, guiding us as "His footprints' fresh and firm impressions / map the worlds we would not see"; like Christ's body, the Church, taking root and spouting "green" in new soil; and like the Church dancing/embracing and dodging/separating from elements of the new culture's worldview as they are expressed in "language, song, and symbol." The final stanza draws the conclusion that the Church should follow Christ's example: "live his teachings, live his grace, / like Christ arise, each day, extending / unconditional embrace."

Consider how each of these images – following Christ's footsteps to see worlds we would otherwise ignore, sprouting a familiar plant in new soil, and dancing/dodging with a new partner – reflect features of Paul's approach to communicating the gospel to a sophisticated pagan audience.

## Departing Hymn

"As Christ and Church and Congregation" is on pp. 35-37 of *The Book of Acts*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Warning to the Wise: Learning from Eutychus's Mistake

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To interpret the story of Eutychus in light of significant narrative themes in Luke and Acts.
2. To consider the role of the story of Eutychus in the book of Acts.
3. To examine the temptation to spiritual laxity in the life of discipleship.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Book of Acts (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "On the Wings of Light Declining" locate one of the familiar tunes PLEADING SAVIOR or RUSTINGTON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Story

I have long been fascinated by the story of Eutychus, "the lucky one." The story seems so odd to me, but I identify with it in a strange way. During the 1960s, the flamboyant evangelist Angel Martinez (1922-1995) preached a two-week-long revival in my home church in Kentucky. He was a renowned and captivating speaker. (Soon after his death, a denominational newspaper named Martinez one of "the ten most influential Texas Baptists of the twentieth century.") Among the evangelist's stratagems to keep young people like me interested and involved in the revival messages was a nightly quiz, in which he asked a puzzling question about the Bible and promised to reward anyone who researched the answer before the next meeting. One night the question was: "Who was the young man who sat in a window, dozed off during the sermon, and fell three stories to his death?" Even the drowsiest among us perked up and began flipping through our Bibles when we heard that one!

I'll admit that for a long time I was in that camp of modern interpreters who see the story of Eutychus as merely a humorous interlude in Luke's account of Paul's return to Jerusalem. But Andrew Arterbury has convinced me the story had a serious point to ancient readers, and it is one that I need to hear today. In this study, Arterbury shows us that the trick to understanding the story of Eutychus is to appreciate some key elements of Luke's literary artistry.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide your hearing of the strange story of Eutychus, "the lucky one."

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 20:7-12 from a modern translation.

### *Reflection*

In this study and the next one, “Philanthropy, Hospitality, and Friendship,” members will need to appreciate Luke’s literary artistry not just to catch the detailed nuances of Luke’s story, but even to understand what the story is about and why it is included in the book of Acts. Determine how much time members will need to trace the four significant themes of miraculous resuscitations, upper rooms, faithful worship, and sleep/night/darkness through Luke and Acts. (Some members will only need a brief reminder of the relevant stories; others may want to summarize or to read some of them again.) Encourage members to reflect on the story’s *warning* about spiritual laxity.

### *Study Questions*

1. Invite a member to read Acts 2:42-43 aloud to identify these marks of discipleship: the apostle’s teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, and miracles performed by the apostles. When we count Paul as the apostle present in Troas, all of these (except prayer) are explicitly mentioned in the brief story of Eutychus. By these marks Luke indicates that for the Christians in Troas, the all-night meeting with Paul is not an ancillary event, but part of the main work of their discipleship.
2. Andrew Arterbury suggests two reasons why Luke might include this story at the end of Paul’s missionary journeys. First, the resuscitation of Eutychus is Paul’s most noteworthy miracle event; it shows that he, like the Apostle Peter, is doing the work of God in faithful continuity with Jesus. Second, the story is a well-placed warning against spiritual laxity; it reminds us that all is not well among the early church members. The story provides a memorable final glimpse of the churches Paul started in Asia Minor and Greece: they included remarkably faithful members who shared deep communion, and others who failed due to their spiritual laxity. Yet the story ends on a positive note: the members embrace Eutychus and “are not a little comforted” by his miraculous return to them.
3. In Luke and Acts, the night and darkness often have negative metaphorical connotations. They are times of uncertainty and danger for human beings, and evil powers may be at work through people’s actions. This can make the darkness a time of fear, as well as rest and sleep, so either way it is easy to miss the night times when God is acting in the world.  
The image of vigilance through the night does not mean that we should never sleep physically, but that we should remain on watch spiritually, even in situations that inspire in us fear or are filled with distraction. Over the centuries the Church has created special times of vigil—for example, before the times set aside to celebrate the announcement of Christ’s birth to Mary, the birth of John the Baptist, Christ’s birth and his death, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Individuals often set aside other times to be spiritually ‘tuned-in’—for instance, when a loved one is dying, a child is expected, a momentous decision is to be made, and so on.
4. Encourage members to reflect on important times that God has been at work around them, but they did not notice. Perhaps a friend or church member was being comforted in a spiritual crisis, or responding to a new sense of God’s purpose for their lives. Perhaps there was a physical or spiritual need in the community to which God was calling them to respond. In these times, were there fears and distractions of the world that occupied their attention instead? Were they tuning out because they were tired, or overwhelmed from the demands of God’s love, or disappointed in a lack of support from fellow believers?

### *Departing Hymn*

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.



# Philanthropy, Hospitality, and Friendship

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand how both giving and receiving philanthropy, hospitality, and friendship are woven through the story of Paul's sea-voyage to Rome.
2. To consider how Paul is presented in this story as a model for our discipleship.
3. To discuss how your congregation gives and receives philanthropy, hospitality, and friendship with people who do not belong to the Christian movement.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Book of Acts (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Day by Day, and with Each Passing Moment" locate the familiar tune BLOTT EN DAG in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with an Observation

Edgar J. Goodspeed (1871-1962), the renowned scholar at the University of Chicago who was noted for his collection of Greek manuscripts and translation of the New Testament, was fascinated by the unusual nature of the Acts of the Apostles. He wrote, "Where, within eighty pages, will be found such a varied series of exciting events—trials, persecutions, escapes, martyrdoms, voyages, shipwrecks, rescues—set in that amazing panorama of the ancient world—Jerusalem, Antioch, Philippi, Corinth, Athens, Ephesus, Rome? And with such scenery and settings—temples, courts, prisons, deserts, ships, barracks, theaters? Has any opera such variety? A bewildering range of scenes and actions (and of speeches) passes before the eye of the historian. And in all of them he sees the providential hand that has made and guided this great movement for the salvation of mankind." (*An Introduction to the New Testament* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1937], 188-189, online at [www.earlychristianwritings.com/goodspeed/](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/goodspeed/)).

In this study, Joshua Jipp explores one of the most exciting events in Acts—the great storm and shipwreck and improbable rescue on the exotic island of Malta that the Apostle Paul undergoes on his sea-voyage to Rome. What role does this lengthy adventure play in Luke's narrative of the early Church? How does it present Paul as a model for our discipleship?

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide your hearing of the strange tale of Paul's shipwreck and rescue.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 27:1-28:10 from a modern translation, or a team of three members to read the passage in this way: Acts 27:1-13, 27:14-44, and 28:1-10.

## Reflection

In this study, like the previous one, “Warning to the Wise: Learning from Eutychus’s Mistake,” members will need to appreciate Luke’s literary artistry not just to catch the detailed nuances of Luke’s story, but even to understand what the story is about and why it is included in the book of Acts. Joshua Jipp shows how the sea-voyage story highlights Gentile characters who give to and receive from Paul acts of philanthropy, hospitality, and friendship. Encourage members to explore the role these virtues should play in their discipleship, both within the congregation and as they interact with people who do not belong to the Christian movement.

## Study Questions

1. Form three small groups to study these distinct interactions in the story – Paul with Julius, with the shipmates, and with the Maltese. In each case, which party initiates the relationship, how does the other party respond, and how would you characterize their actions – as an act of philanthropy, hospitality, and/or friendship?  
Briefly clarify the three overlapping virtues. Joshua Jipp writes, “*Philanthropy* – often translated as kindness, love for humanity, or generosity – was considered to be one of the premier Hellenistic virtues and was often associated with the making and maintenance of friendships through acts of mercy, kindness, hospitality, and clemency.” The term is explicitly used in Acts 27:3 to describe Julius’s action, but members may find the philanthropic attitude in other characters as well. *Hospitality* involves making a stranger welcome, and serving as host in the distribution of resources to meet the other’s needs. *Friendship* is a more ongoing relationship of reciprocal caring, but we often speak of people being “friendly” when they act in ways to initiate such a relationship.
2. The *soldiers* in the story might be stereotyped as brave and faithful citizens, but more likely they were seen by readers “as violent, brutish, and willing to use force to keep the prisoners in order” (cf. Acts 27:43; Luke 23:11). The *ship’s crew* would be strangers to the prisoners as well, and seen as unlikely to take their advice (Acts 27:10-11) or care for them (27:29-30); furthermore, the *prisoners* on this voyage were strangers to one another as well (27:1). Luke twice describes the *Maltese islanders* as “barbarians” (28:2, 4), which heightens the expectation that they will be *inhospitable* to the shipwrecked strangers. Jipp writes, “Luke seems, in fact, to make a point of invoking cultural stereotypes (of Roman centurions, prisoners, and barbarians) only to overturn them – namely, to show that these are the people to whom God’s salvation has and will extend and that they are not only worthy of receiving but are supremely capable of practicing and initiating friendship, hospitality, and philanthropy.”
3. Paul is “open to fresh encounters with all peoples,” both accepting and offering hospitality. He is generous to strangers, sharing “the gifts of God – table-fellowship, the salvation/safety of the shipmates, and healing,” Jipp notes. “When Paul initiates a meal with his shipmates and takes the lead as host (27:33-38),...[he] clearly mimics Jesus’ sharing of meals with all people in the Gospel of Luke.”
4. Invite members to give examples of *giving to* and *receiving from* others (especially those who do not belong to the Christian movement) philanthropy, hospitality, and friendship, either in their personal lives, or in concert with other members of the congregation. Consider how members can encourage and support one another in activities that display these virtues.  
Jipp comments on the motive and manner of Paul’s generosity: “the gifts of God – table-fellowship, the salvation/safety of the shipmates, and healing – are not hoarded or held back as the exclusive property of Paul but are shared liberally and freely with those not belonging to Paul’s own kinship network. They are, furthermore, shared without requiring or asking for a response.” He continues, “Congregations who would continue to embody the same message and values should reflect upon where and how their gifts and resources may be put to use in service of the larger world.”
5. Chad Hartsock describes “the ever expanding gospel” in Acts as moving out geographically from Jerusalem and across cultural barriers to Gentiles. In this story, Luke emphasizes that Paul interacted in love with people – e.g., the Roman centurion, the rough seafarers, and the “barbarian” Maltese people – who might be stereotyped as bad or dangerous by readers. By analogy, the gospel today should be shared with all people. Sometimes, this means sharing it with people who live close by, but are stereotyped and socially marginalized from the Church due to their ethnicity, economic status, or behaviors

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.