

10 STUDIES IN ACTS

This is the third in a series of three small-group Bible study discussion guides that explore the meaning of “witness.” The book of Acts is a fascinating account of the early disciples as they formed the early church and spread the good news of Jesus. Luke—a doctor who traveled along on some of these adventures—tells the story in an interesting, accurate, and reliable way. May God give your small group rich and rewarding insights as you study his Word together!

The questions in this guide are for your use in preparing and leading. (*Note: Helpful leader’s notes are in italics throughout the guide.*) Make the questions your own, and become familiar with them so that you won’t have to look down at your page too often. Have your own written responses handy as you lead the study. Decide how much discussion time each group of questions is worth, and leave time for the application questions at the end of each study.

It is easier for study and discussion if everyone has the same version of the Bible. The questions in these studies are based on the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) text. The New International Version (NIV) or the New American Standard Bible (NASB) are other popular versions of the Bible your group may wish to use.

ACTS 1:1-11: CALLED TO BE WITNESSES

Getting Started

In common usage, what is a witness? (*Someone who has seen something and is able to talk about it.*) In what ways are people witnesses in everyday situations? (*Think of news reporting, an accident scene, or a court scene.*)

1. Acts is Dr. Luke's sequel to his Gospel, taking up the story where he left off in the book of Luke. Read Luke 24:36-53 to set the stage for the opening to Acts.
2. Now read Acts 1:1-11. How was Jesus occupied during the time between his resurrection and his ascension into heaven? How would these things prepare the disciples for his departure?
3. Why couldn't they begin spreading the word of the kingdom of God immediately? What did Jesus mean by "the promise of the Father"? (*Note: See John 14:16-17, 25-26 for more background.*)
4. What expectation is reflected in the disciples' question in verse 6? (*Note: Most Jewish people had expected the Messiah to be a political/military ruler who would set Israel free from Roman rule and establish Israel as a great political power.*) How does Jesus redirect their attention (verses 7-8)? Are there similar concerns we struggle with that can distract us from our primary responsibilities as Jesus' representatives? How should we keep these in proper perspective?
5. What are the disciples told they'll receive in verse 8? For what purpose will they receive him? What is the scope of their assignment? If this had taken place in your town or on your campus, what places could be substituted for those in verse 8?
6. What happened next? What kinds of reactions might this have produced among the disciples? What do the men in white robes tell the disciples? How would this information have helped the disciples just then? And later?
7. At the beginning we defined *witness*. In verse 8 the disciples were called to be witnesses to Jesus. How does this call extend to us?

In Closing

Spend some time praying for power to be witnesses to the person and work of Jesus, beginning where we are and continuing to the ends of the earth.

ACTS 3:1-26: WITNESS TO AND THROUGH JESUS' POWER

Getting Started

When was a time you asked for one thing but got something better in return?

1. Have someone (or a few people) read Acts 3:1-26 aloud. How does Luke describe the condition and situation of the beggar in verse 2?
2. Recount the actions of Peter in verses 3-7. What details does Luke give in verses 7-9 to let us know that this is a miracle?
3. What was the reaction of the crowd in verses 10-11? What possible misunderstanding of the miracle on the crowd's part did Peter anticipate in verse 12?
4. From verse 12 to the end of the chapter, Peter speaks to the crowd about Jesus. Looking at verses 13-15, contrast the titles Peter uses to designate Jesus with the horrendous ways the people treated him. What "excuse" do they have (verse 17)?
5. In verses 19-23, what does Peter say is a proper response to Jesus Christ? What are the benefits? What is the consequence if they do not respond positively?
6. While scanning through Peter's entire speech, pick out the promises that God had made through his servants. How has Jesus already fulfilled those promises? How is he fulfilling them presently? How will he fulfill them in the future? (*Note: Verse 25 says that through the descendants of Abraham "all the families of the earth will be blessed." The offspring of Abraham who were to be the instruments of this blessing were the Jewish people originally (verse 25), Jesus Christ ultimately, and believers in Jesus now [Galatians 3:29].*)

In Closing

Peter and John certainly brought a “blessing” to this lame man, and a “blessing” of the good news to those who heard their message. How can you be an instrument of God’s blessing to your campus this week? To the world?

ACTS 4:23-37: THE WITNESS OF LIFE TOGETHER

Background

In the section leading up to this (Acts 3:1-4:22), Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council of priests and elders. After considerable debate, they were released but sternly charged not to continue to preach the gospel. Yet Peter tells them, “We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Act 4:23-37 gives us an inside look at a community of witnesses to Jesus.

Getting Started

Think of a group of people—a community (Christian or non-Christian)—of which you are a member. What defines your community? How do its members relate to one another? How does the community relate to those outside it?

1. Get someone with a keen sense of drama to read Acts 4:23-37. After Peter and John are released, what is the first thing they do? How does the community respond to the situation? How does your Christian community respond to opposition?
2. Look for a moment at verses 24-28. How is God described? What do these different descriptions tell us about him?
3. As they pray, the community quotes from Psalm 2, a prophetic psalm referring to the coming kingship of Christ. Turn for a minute to Psalm 2:1-9, but don’t lose your place in Acts. How are the events recounted in this psalm similar to the events recounted in Acts 4:27-28?
4. In each case, who is standing in opposition to God? How does God respond? Why is this opposition “in vain”?

5. How would recalling God's past dealing with those who conspire against him be an encouragement to this fledgling community?
6. Now look at the rest of the prayer in Acts 4:29-30. In light of what God has done in the past, what do they ask him to do for them? How does he respond to them in verse 31?
7. Verses 32-37 give us a closer look at the Christian community. What are some specific ways they lived out their "one heart and soul [*or mind*]?" What does this tell us about their priorities?
8. Verse 33 tells about their witness ("testimony"). What adjectives are used to describe their witness?
9. Put yourself in the story. If you were on the outside looking in, what might be going through your mind as you observe these Christians interacting with each other and with others?

In Closing

What does it mean to be "one in heart and soul"? What doesn't it mean? What would your fellowship on campus look like if it really was of "one heart and soul"? What would your witness be like? What are some things you can do to strengthen your community?

ACTS 6:1-8:4: STEPHEN'S WITNESS AND DEATH

Getting Started

What do you think was the cost for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in the first century? What is the potential cost on your campus or in your family?

1. Read Acts 6:1-8. What words are used here to characterize Stephen (verses 3, 5, 8)?
2. Now read verses 9-15. Compare the way Stephen's opponents handled the "problem" that they had (Stephen's powerful preaching) with the way the believers in verses 1-8 handled the problem of food distribution.
3. Why do you think the activities of Stephen and the church aroused opposition (verses 7-8)? What led Stephen's opponents to resort to deception (verse 10)? Why do you think Luke mentions in verse 15 that Stephen's face was "like the face of an angel"?
4. What are the prevalent attitudes on your campus toward the gospel of Jesus Christ? Do the things Christian students do and preach arouse opposition? Why or why not?
5. Give the group a few moments to skim Acts 7:1-50, which records Stephen's defense against the charges of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Have them try to summarize the central point of Stephen's speech. *(Note: By tracing God's calling and promise through the patriarchs, Stephen demonstrates that it is the religious establishment—not the Christian community—that misunderstands the temple and the law of Moses. He draws the distinction between God's faithful prophets and those who rejected them. He identifies Christians as God's truly faithful people and the religious leaders as being opposed to God.)*

6. Read Acts 7:51-60. In what ways are Stephen's opponents just like their ancestors (verses 51-52)? What is the irony of verse 53? As this story unfolds, why do Stephen's opponents become so hostile? How does Stephen respond?
7. Read 8:1-4. How did the purposes of Stephen's persecutors contribute to the mission of the church (verse 4)? What does this say about God?

In Closing

Compare the message of salvation in Jesus Christ to the conventional wisdom on your campus. Do you see any evidences of hostility or suspicion toward the gospel? In what ways does your behavior affect the credibility of your witness (both positively and negatively)?

ACTS 9:1-22: WITNESS TO THE POWER TO CONVERT AND TRANSFORM

Getting Started

If you were to vote for the person “most likely never to become a Christian,” whom would you choose? Why?

If you had lived in the first century, you probably would have chosen Saul of Tarsus—and you wouldn’t have been alone. In the passage you will read the powerful story of a very unlikely convert.

1. Read Acts 9:1-2. What do these verses, as well as the previous study, tell us about Saul and his relationship with the early believers? What symbols of power does Paul have as he travels to Damascus?
2. Now read Acts 9:3-22 to get the rest of the story. Looking at verses 3-9, what happened to Saul on his journey? Try to visualize the scene, and put yourself in the place of the eyewitnesses mentioned in verse 7. What do you see and hear? What are you feeling? How do you think Saul felt?
3. What does the Lord tell Ananias to do? How does Ananias respond? Thinking of the person you chose as the “most unlikely Christian,” what would you do if Jesus came to you in a vision telling you to confront this person?
4. In verse 15, Jesus responds to Ananias’s fear and objections by commanding him to go and by sharing his plans for Saul’s life. What is the Lord’s plan for Saul’s life? *(Note: Saul later becomes the famous apostle Paul.)*
5. What happens in verses 17-20 as Ananias is obedient to Jesus’ call? How does Saul respond? What might this tell us about facing someone we don’t want to talk to but whom we feel God wants us to talk to?

6. In verses 21-22 what are the words used to describe people's response to the message (Jesus is the Son of God, the Christ) and the messenger (Saul)? How is Saul's life transformed?
7. Look back through the whole passage. Who has the power in this passage and who is reacting to that power? While most conversions are not as dramatic as Paul's, how was yours similar? How did Jesus show himself to you? Was there an "Ananias" in your life?

In Closing

Think again of your choice for "the most unlikely Christian." From this passage, what have you learned that speaks to your doubts about their becoming a believer? Take a few minutes as a group to pray for the people you mentioned.

For Further Discussion

Put yourself in Ananias's place and imagine what he was feeling in this passage. We're not all public preachers like Paul, but we are called to be witnesses and encouragers like Ananias. To whom can you be an "Ananias" this week? Is there a young Christian you can encourage to grow? Is there someone you need to challenge?

ACTS 13:1-12: SENT TO BE TRUTH-SPEAKING WITNESSES

Getting Started

Have you (or someone you know) ever felt called by God to do something unusual or radical? Talk about the situation and how you (or that person) responded. What were the results?

1. Read Acts 13:1-12. Look carefully at the list of prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch. (*Note: According to Acts 11:19-22, this was the first truly multiethnic local church, with Jews and Gentiles together in one local congregation.*) What do you notice about these people? What were they doing?
2. How often are praying and fasting mentioned in verses 2-3? Why do you think the people prayed and fasted before and after the selection of Barnabas and Saul?
3. Who sets them apart for the work? Who sends them on their way? How does the Spirit's initiative interact with the people's listening and obeying?
4. What would you think, and how would your church react, if next Sunday the elders announced, "This week the Holy Spirit told us to send two of our leaders off to the mission field full time. And so we sent them off. They're gone, and we're not really sure where they'll end up"?
5. According to verses 4-5, where did Barnabas and Paul go? (*Note: You might want to locate these places on a map in the back of a Bible or in a Bible atlas.*) What did they do when they got there? Why do you think they started in the synagogues?
6. They continued to preach until they came to Paphos, the seat of the Roman government on the island. In verses 6-8, who was interested in what they had to say? Who tried to stop them? Why?
7. Imagine that you are doing evangelism in another state, and a senator of that state invites you to share the gospel with him. How would you feel? What if while you are there one of his top aides opposes you? What would you do?

8. In verse 9, before Paul responds to Bar-Jesus/Elymas in words, what does Luke say about Paul? Why do you think Luke mentions these things?
9. How does Paul respond to Bar-Jesus' (Elymas's) opposition? Note that verse 6 calls the man Bar-Jesus, which means "son of Jesus." In verse 8, Luke calls him by his translated name, Elymas. In verse 10, what does Paul call him? Why do you think Paul responds with such harsh-sounding words? Do you think that what happened to Elymas was fitting? What would you be feeling if you were there and witnessed these events?
10. How did the proconsul react when he saw what happened? Does his response surprise you? Why or why not?

In Closing

Do you know anyone like the proconsul—someone who is open to the gospel and seeking to learn more? How can you help them? Do you know anyone like Elymas—someone who openly opposes the gospel, or who tries to interfere with your sharing the gospel? How can you pray for them? How can you, led by the Holy Spirit, speak the truth to them in a way they will understand?

ACTS 16:16-34: WITNESS IN MACEDONIA: THE PHILIPPIAN JAILER

Background

While in Macedonia, Paul and his companions go to a place of prayer and meet a businesswoman named Lydia. The Lord opens her heart, and she responds to Paul's message. Our study begins at this point.

Getting Started

Tell of a time you shared the gospel with another person in your everyday experience.

1. Read Acts 16:16-34. On their journey to a place of prayer, Paul and his companions meet a young woman (verses 16-18). How is she described? What is she saying and why would this trouble Paul so much? What place do you think this woman held in society?
2. Why are the owners of the slave girl angry with Paul and his companions? What charge do they bring against them? What are Paul and Silas saying from the clues in verse 17? How might this message have sounded to Roman ears? Does the gospel threaten anyone's vested interests on your campus?
3. Describe how Paul and Silas were persecuted for preaching the gospel in verses 22-24. How might they be feeling now? In verse 25, how is the response of Paul and Silas to their persecution different from the way most people would react?
4. Picture yourself as a fellow prisoner of Paul and Silas. What would you be wondering or feeling? Describe what happens to the prison in verse 26. What does this tell us about God?
5. What is the jailer's initial reaction to the earthquake? Why does he react this way (verses 23-24, 27)? What does the jailer realize in verse 30? Why is the question he asks such an urgent one?

6. How do Paul and Silas respond to his question in verses 31-32? In light of all that has happened, how does the jailer then respond?

In Closing

How do the happenings in Acts 16:16-34 motivate you to share the gospel where you are?

How does this account encourage you to move out of your comfort zone on campus?

ACTS 17:16-34: WITNESS TO THE UNKNOWN GOD: PAUL IN ATHENS

Getting Started

"The world's major religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, are making inroads as are a variety of cults, New Age philosophies, occult activities and even traditional paganism. How do we cope with a world that knows or cares so little about the truth of Jesus Christ? Paul left us a helpful model when he visited the world center of pagan philosophy and religion— Athens" (*NIV Quiet Time Bible*, InterVarsity Press).

What are some of the "idols" people worship on your campus? What is so attractive about these idols?

1. Read Acts 17:16-34. What upset Paul about Athens, and what did he do about it (verses 16-17)?
2. Describe the Athenians' reaction to the gospel message in verses 18-21. What are some things that might have caused this response? (*Note: Epicureanism was a school of Greek philosophy that emphasized the remoteness of uncaring gods, a world governed by blind chance, the absence of an afterlife and the pursuit of pleasure. Stoicism emphasized a world determined by fate, where human beings must pursue their duty, "resigning themselves to live in harmony with nature and reason, however painful this might be, and develop their own self-sufficiency"* (John Stott, *The Message of Acts* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990], p. 281). *The Areopagus was a hill overlooking Athens that served as the chief courtroom of the day; it was also a place to hold philosophical discussions.*)
3. What strategies does Paul employ when he begins his address at the Areopagus in verses 22-23?
4. What does Paul emphasize as he describes the "unknown god" in verses 24-28? Why might he stress these particular things to this group of listeners?

5. Note how Paul quotes from Greek philosophy and poetry in verse 28. Why do you think he does this? What implications does this have for us as we share Christ on campus?
6. In verses 29-31, what else does Paul say about God? How does he introduce the concept of Jesus? What does he emphasize about Jesus? If you had the time or opportunity to say just one or two things about Jesus, what would you emphasize?
7. In verses 29-31, what kind of response does Paul think the Athenians should have to his message, and why? What kind of response do they give him in verses 32-34? How are these responses like those you get as you share the gospel?
8. Paul uses the altar with the “unknown god” inscription as a “launch pad” to share God’s truth. What starting points do you have with those around you? How could you use these more effectively?
9. Paul shares the gospel with the Athenians in a way that is relevant, sensitive, and uncompromising to the truth. In what ways might you be tempted to water down God’s message to groups of people you share with? In what ways are you tempted to be too harsh? How can you avoid either extreme?

In Closing

How are you involved in the lives of non-Christians around you? If you’re not, what specific steps can you take? How can you become better equipped to effectively communicate the gospel with these people in a way they can understand?

ACTS 25-26: WITNESSES BEFORE KINGS AND RULERS

Background

As a Roman citizen, Paul could not be bound or imprisoned without a trial, and he is about to go before King Agrippa. Agrippa and Bernice were the great-grandchildren of Herod the Great, the king who ruled when Jesus was born. Festus was the procurator or governor of Judea.

Getting Started

1. If you were called before your dean of students or your college president to give a defense of your actions as a Christian on campus, how would you feel? What would be running through your mind?
2. Read Acts 25:23-27. Observe verses 23-24 carefully and try to picture what this scene looked like. What feeling was this pomp intended to convey to a person who is brought before the king and queen for interrogation?
3. Why is Paul appearing before them (verses 24-27)? According to verse 27 how long has Paul been waiting in jail? What would you be feeling at this point if you were Paul?
4. Now read 26:1-23. In verses 2-3 how does Paul start his defense? Why do you think he does it this way?
5. In verses 4-14 Paul tells his story. What are his major points? What does he emphasize about Jesus' commands to him in verses 16-18?
6. To what does Paul appeal in verses 19-23? How does he summarize the gospel? In verse 24, how does Festus respond? Why? How does Paul respond? Why do you think Paul asks King Agrippa if he believes in the prophets?
7. In verse 28, King Agrippa answers Paul's question with a question of his own. What feeling was Agrippa expressing? What do you see about Paul's passion and vision

for the gospel in his heartfelt statement in verse 29? How does this compare with your passion for the gospel?

8. Note the rulers' conversation in verses 30-32. How have they been affected by Paul's presentation?
9. Go back over Paul's speech and summarize some of the things that Paul does to share effectively with the king, Bernice, and the governor. *(He affirms the king [verses 2-3], shares his own conversion story [verses 4-19], describes his calling and assures the king of his good motives [verses 16-19], explains the gospel clearly [verse 23], and appeals to the king to believe [verses 26-29].)*

In Closing

What do you learn here about tailoring your message to the situation? About boldness, clarity, and respect? About the power of your story? Spend some time praying for opportunities to share the gospel boldly with those around you. Remember, God is in control; he is sovereign and powerful!

ACTS 28:17-31: WITNESSING TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH: ROME

Background

Rome was the capital of the Empire, a multicultural setting where decisions were made that affected the world. Paul had planned for a long time to visit Rome as a missionary. Instead he was brought as a prisoner. Yet this change of plans didn't deter him from his real mission: sharing the gospel.

Getting Started

Think of a time when you made plans that you thought were from the Lord—and then had to watch them change. What was your attitude?

1. Read Acts 28:17-31. What does Paul do when he arrives in Rome? In his meeting with the Jewish leaders, what does he say? Why do you think he goes to such great lengths to introduce himself and clear himself before the Jewish leaders (verses 17-20)?
2. How do the Jewish leaders respond (verses 21-22)? How do you think Paul might have felt when he heard this response?
3. Describe the meeting between Paul and the Jewish leaders in verses 23-24. Paul tried to convince them about Jesus Christ from the law of Moses and from the prophets. Think about the needs and backgrounds of students you encounter on campus. How can we put the truths about Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God into a cultural context that they can understand?
4. How do Paul's listeners respond to his case for Jesus in verses 24-25? In verses 25b-28,

5. Paul passes judgment on his listeners using a text from the Old Testament (Isaiah 6:9-10). What point is he trying to make about them? How do you think they might have responded?
6. Look carefully at verse 28. How does this summarize some of the themes we have seen in the book of Acts? How does it fit with Acts 1:8?
7. Looking at the rest of the passage, describe how Paul spent the next two years in Rome. Whom do you think “all” refers to in verse 30? What was he proclaiming? Compare this to Jesus’ words in Acts 1:1-8.

In Closing

God has put you where you are. How can you be an obedient witness in sharing the gospel with the people around you?

Conclusion

Many people think Acts has a rather abrupt ending. But in light of Acts 1:1-11, why is this a good ending? Perhaps Acts 29, 30, and so forth are really for our stories!

Take some time as a group to review some of the themes you’ve seen in your study of Acts.

Which ones affected you most? How have you been encouraged to be bolder witnesses? To rely on the Spirit more? To appreciate God’s sovereignty? To cross a cultural barrier? Decide together on a bold step you will take as a result of something God has shown you in Acts.