

Holy Trinity Claygate



Paul preaching in Athens (Acts 17) by Raphael

Acts: God on the Move

Small Groups Study Material

Spring 2012

Study 9: The Gospel spread (Acts 11:19-30) / Vision Sunday review

Welcome:

- Share with the group some of your personal hopes and fears for 2012.
- Share one thing that especially struck you from listening to Philip's Vision Sunday talk.

Exploring the Early Church: Read Acts 11:19-30

More, deeper and closer followers of Jesus

- Find evidence in this passage of how the church in Antioch
 - helped people come to faith in Jesus
 - helped believers to deepen their faith
 - cared for God's work and people elsewhere
- Reflect on the ways we at HTC will be seeking in 2012 to
 - help people come to faith in Jesus (four Alpha courses, new congregation)
 - go deeper in faith (prayer initiatives)
 - be part of God's wider mission (including developments for small groups)
- How will the new initiatives stretch our faith? How might we grow through this?

Giving

- What have we learned about giving so far in our study of Acts (cf Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-5:11; 8:18-23)?
- Look at v29: 'The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help...' Share the principles you have found helpful in reviewing our giving to God's work.

Learning from the Early Church:

- Looking ahead as a church in 2012, what encouragements are there for us? What might challenge us?
- How can learning from the early church in Acts help us to be faithful in 2012?

Praying for the Church:

- Pray that God will give us the faith to meet the opportunities of serving Him in 2012.
- Pray that God will bring more, deeper and closer followers of Jesus through our ministry in 2012.
- Pray that God will guide each one of us as we review our giving to His work.

Study 10: A hidden hand at work (Acts 12:1-25)

Welcome: Has someone ever helped you out whilst keeping their identity a secret or do you know of a situation or story in which this was the case? What happened and how did it feel? Share as you wish.

Exploring the Early Church: Read Acts 12:1-25

- What does the passage reveal about Herod's character and his motives for killing James and imprisoning Peter (vv1-4)?
- What picture emerges of the church's prayer for Peter? Refer to vv5 and 12-16.
- How is the 'hidden hand' at work in the passage? How does it impact individuals in very different ways?
- Which seem to you the most important two or three verses in the passage? There are a number of possible answers, but try to support your nominations with a strong reason why they are so.

Learning from the Early Church:

- What does the passage tell us, or remind us, about God's character and His priorities?
- Take a look at Ephesians 3:20. In what way does it encourage us to pray? How might Rhoda have responded to hearing that verse?
- There may be times when we all feel hard done by. How does this passage encourage and help us?

Praying for the Church:

- Pray that we will be faithful in prayer for those seeking to spread the gospel.
- Pray that God's priorities may always be ours. Pray for His guidance and 'hidden hand' to be at work when we are aware of competing priorities in our lives.
- Pray that the gospel will continue to 'increase and spread'. Pray for your own role in that and for others whom you know.
- Give thanks for a God who is glorious, just and performs great acts beyond our imagining.

Study 11: Jerusalem: Grace or law (Acts 15:1-21)

Welcome: Discuss the great church disagreements that you know about in history and today. What have been the various consequences of these disagreements?

Exploring the Early Church: Read Acts 15:1-21

- What was the dispute between Paul and Barnabas and the 'men from Judea'? Why was this such an important issue (vv1-5)?
- How did they seek to resolve the argument in v2?
- In groups of two or three, summarise Peter's argument.
- What event (earlier in Acts) was Peter referring to when 'God made a choice' for the Gentiles (v7)?
- What additional argument persuaded James that the Gentiles were to be accepted (vv14-19)?
- Why do you think the Gentiles were asked specifically to avoid the activities listed in v20? What was the authority and basis for this decision (v21)?

Learning from the Early Church:

- Is the dispute Paul and Barnabas had an issue in the church today? If so, can you give examples?
- What can we learn from the course of action Paul and Barnabas took in resolving their dispute for the church today?
- Are there people who are cut off from the church today, like some Gentiles at this point in the early church?
- What can we learn from the decision in vv20-21? What guidance does it give us in the midst of disagreement today?

Praying for the Church:

- Pray for the church to be rooted in grace and not works.
- Pray for the faithfulness of the church to Biblical and Apostolic teaching.
- Pray for the unity of the church.
- Give thanks to God for the universal offer of the Gospel.

Study 12: Athens: Contending for the faith (Acts 17:16-34)

Welcome: Discuss how our Christian faith relates to and engages with some key aspects of contemporary culture (e.g. fame, materialism, tolerance etc.)

Exploring the Early Church: Read Acts 17:16-34

- What distressed Paul in Athens?
- What attracted the Athenians' interest in Paul and why (v18)?
- How would you describe Paul's approach to sharing the Gospel in vv22-23?
- How does Paul seek to correct the Athenians' view of God (vv24-29)?
- How does Paul tailor his message for his Athenian audience?
- What is Paul's ultimate challenge to the Athenians (vv30-31)?
- What three responses are there to Paul's message (vv32-34)?

Learning from the Early Church:

- In what ways is Athens similar to our contemporary society?
- What can we learn from Paul's approach to sharing the Gospel? How can we model it today?
- How can we communicate the Christian message relevantly and share our faith effectively in our contemporary culture?
- Share some contemporary examples from your own experience (without breaching confidentiality) of all three Athenian responses.

Praying for the Church:

- Pray for the most distressing parts of our contemporary society.
- Pray for the church as it seeks to reach out and preach the Gospel in the secular world – especially for HTC.
- Pray for your small group and each other as you seek to witness your faith in a secular world.
- Pray for those you know who are in one of the three categories of Athenian response (sneering, further enquiry and belief).

Study 13: Corinth: A church planted (Acts 18:1-17)

Welcome: Has anyone in your group lived or worked for any length of time in a country where the Christian church was in the minority or even absent? What did it feel like to be a Christian in those circumstances? If not, imagine what it might be like or share information about the church in a country you know about.

Exploring the Early Church: Read Acts 18:1-17

- What did Paul do when he first arrived in Corinth (vv1-4)?
- How did Paul's ministry change when he was joined by Silas and Timothy (vv5-7)? How important do you think that was in the formation of the church in Corinth?
- Why were the Jews particularly opposed to Paul, wanting to silence him (vv5, 13)?
- How did Gallio advance the cause of God's kingdom on this occasion (vv12-16)?
- What three things kept Paul going in the face of opposition by the Jews (vv5, 7-8, 9-10)?

Learning from the Early Church:

- How can Paul's example encourage us if we feel as if we are in the Christian minority today? What keeps us going in the face of opposition or indifference?
- Paul was not merely 'holding a line' but was actively growing a new church. What does this passage have to tell us today about the principles of effective church growth / planting?

Praying for the Church:

- Pray that as a church we might put into practice those things that we have learned from this study.
- Pray for HTC's mission partners serving in places where Christians are a minority faith.
- Pray for any individuals whom you know to be going through difficult times because of their faith.

Study 14: Farewell and tears (Acts 20:13-38)

Welcome: Final goodbyes are difficult, so too is passing the baton from one generation to the next. As a group, brainstorm some ways that these types of situations can be difficult. Can you think of any contemporary examples from church or family life?

Exploring the Early Church: Read Acts 20:13-38

- What are some reasons Paul might have to think his situation is hopeless? Why might he have reason to think the future of the church in Ephesus was without hope?
- How is v24 compelling? What is attractive about what Paul is saying in this verse? What is challenging?
- Paul saw a bigger picture that explained his future hardship. What motivated Paul to continue despite adversity? What made hardship worth enduring for Paul – what was the ultimate prize for him?
- How did Paul's perspective of the bigger picture affect his character? How might you describe Paul as a leader of the church? How would you describe him as a servant of Christ? What traits stand out (see especially vv18-23, 32-34)?
- Of what does Paul warn the Ephesian elders (vv28-31)? Why is the threat they face more imminent now that Paul is leaving them?
- How do the Ephesian elders respond to Paul's visit (vv36-38)? What emotions do they exhibit? What does this tell us about their faith in God and their love of Paul?

Learning from the Early Church:

- In what ways might you take on the sentiments of v24 in your own life, in the mission God has for you?
- What do you think would help you to see the bigger picture of God's grace in the midst of adversity? What reminders could you place in your life?
- What character traits of Paul's do you wish you had more of in your life?
- Can you think of ways where we might be vulnerable to false teaching or adversity? How might we respond faithfully in these tests? How might our verse of the year (Psalm 73:26) help us grow in faith in these experiences?

Praying for the Church:

- Pray that the church would live the ethic described in v24. Consider using this verse as a pattern for your prayer.
- Pray that the church and every Christian might grow in grace and virtue. Pray against the plans of those who would lead the church astray through false teaching.
- Spend some time praising God for His sovereign power in all circumstances. Give to God circumstances in your lives that seem hopeless, threatening or scary.

Study 15: The gospel in Rome (Acts 28:11-31)

Welcome: Paul arrived in Rome on a ship with the figureheads of Castor and Pollux (two pagan Gods, ironically, of protection for shipping). What is the least appropriate, or oddest, entry you have made to a new place?!

Exploring the Early Church: Read Acts 28:11-31

- How do you imagine Paul was feeling on his arrival in Rome? See also Acts 23:11.
- Shortly after his arrival, Paul initially speaks to the Jewish leaders (Acts 28:17-22) and refers to his chains as caused by the 'hope of Israel'. What point is he making to them?
- Why is there a divergent response to Paul's proclamation of Jesus (v24)?
- Why is the final verse such an appropriate ending to Acts?

Learning from the Early Church:

- Acts gives us a picture of the gospel and its messengers as unstoppable. How does this relate to our verse for the year (Psalm 73:26)?
- Looking at Acts as a whole, how do you reflect on
 - the church's priorities (the Christian church and HTC specifically)?
 - your small group and its mission?
 - your personal priorities?

Praying for the Church:

- Give thanks to God for our brothers and sisters in Christ who welcome and encourage us when we are tired or in unfamiliar places.
- Pray that the church's mission may increasingly be unhindered by those obstacles erected by its opponents.
- Pray that the gospel may be proclaimed boldly, so that more come to living faith in Jesus as Saviour and Redeemer.
- Pray that the strength you need as a group, and as individuals, for your own missions may be derived from God ('He is all I ever need' – Psalm 73:26).