Bible Study Commentary

Acts

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Analysis of Acts

1:1–6:7	**The birth of the church**
	1:1–26 The forty days and after
	2:1–47 The day of Pentecost
	3:1–4:31 A miracle and its sequel
	4:32–5:11 All things in common
	5:12–6:7 Conflict and progress
6:8–9:31	**Persecution leads to expansion**
	6:8–8:1a The activity and death of Stephen
	8:1b–40 Dispersal; the ministry of Philip
	9:1–31 The conversion of Paul
9:32–12:24	**Acts of Peter: the Gentiles brought in**
	9:32–43 Peter in western Palestine
	10:1–48 Peter preaches the gospel to Gentiles
	11:1–18 Peter's action vindicated
	11:19–30 Christianity planted in Antioch
	12:1–24 Herod Agrippa's attack on the church
12:25–16:5	**Barnabas and Paul's missionary tour and the apostolic decree**
	12:25–13:12 Barnabas and Paul evangelise Cyprus
	13:13–14:28 Barnabas and Paul evangelise central Asia Minor
	15:1–35 Council of Jerusalem and apostolic decree
	15:36–16:5 Paul and Silas set out for the west
16:6–19:20	**The gospel planted west and east of the Aegean**
	16:6–17:15 The gospel comes to Macedonia
	17:16–34 Paul at Athens
	18:1–17 Christianity in Corinth
	18:18–28 Apollos at Ephesus and Corinth
	19:1–20 Paul's Ephesian ministry
19:21–28:31	**Paul plans to visit Rome and reaches his goal by an unexpected way**
	19:21–41 Riot in the theatre at Ephesus
	20:1–21:16 Paul's last journey to Jerusalem
	21:17–26:32 Paul's arrest and imprisonment: he appeals to Caesar
	27:1–28:16 Paul's journey to Rome
	28:17–31 Paul in Rome

Historical Background

AD	
c 30	Resurrection and ascension of Christ; Pentecost (chs. 1, 2)
c 33	Death of Stephen and conversion of Paul (chs. 7–9)
c 35	Paul visits Jerusalem (9:26)
c 35–45	Paul in Tarsus (9:30)
37	Gaius (Caligula) succeeds Tiberius as Roman Emperor
41	Claudius succeeds Gaius as Roman Emperor (11:28; 18:2)
c 41	Conversion of Cornelius (ch. 10)
41–44	Herod Agrippa king of the Jews
43–44	Herod Agrippa's attack on the church (ch. 12)
45–46	Paul joins Barnabas in Antioch (11:25, 26)
46	Barnabas and Paul's famine-relief visit to Jerusalem (11:30)
47–48	Barnabas and Paul in Cyprus and central Asia Minor (chs 13–14)
47–58	Ananias high priest in Jerusalem (23:2)
49	Council of Jerusalem (ch. 15)
49	Jews expelled from Rome (18:2)
49–50	Paul and Silas travel from Antioch to Europe (chs. 15–17)
50–52	Paul in Corinth (ch. 18)
51–52	Gallio proconsul of Achaia (18:12)
52–59	Felix procurator of Judea (23:24)
52–55	Paul in Ephesus (ch. 19)
54	Nero succeeds Claudius as Roman Emperor
55–57	Paul in Macedonia, Illyricum and Greece (20:1, 2; Rom. 15:19)
57	Paul's last visit to Jerusalem; his arrest and imprisonment (chs. 21–26)
59–61	Festus procurator of Judea (24:27)
59	Paul appeals to Caesar (25:11)
59–60	Paul's journey to Rome (27:1–28:16)
60–62	Paul in Rome (28:17–31)
64	Great fire of Rome
c 65	Paul and Peter executed in Rome

Questions for further study and discussion on Acts chapters 1–2

1. How can we know when we should wait and when work (compare Acts 1:4; Isa. 40:31)? What happens when we get this wrong?

2. What other New Testament passages throw light on the subject-matter covered by the risen Lord when 'speaking of the kingdom of God' (1:3)?

3. How many promises of the coming of the Spirit can you find in both Testaments before the Day of Pentecost?

4. When Jesus ascended into heaven, why were the disciples filled with joy instead of sadness? In what ways should this challenge us?

5. From Acts 1:16 onwards the apostles quoted and applied the Old Testament. Why did they do this with such confidence? How important should the Old Testament be to Christians today?

6. What do you think of the suggestion that the eleven apostles should have waited for the conversion of Paul before co-opting a replacement for Judas?

7. It is sometimes taught that there will be a future fulfilment of Joel 2:28–32, over and above the fulfilment announced by Peter. Can you find any support for this idea?

8. Why is it that the Day of Pentecost has been called 'the birthday of the church'?

9. Try meeting together as a group for a fellowship meal, for the purpose of praying together and praising God, as well as sharing food.

Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 3–4

1. Why do you think the apostles should attend the Temple services so regularly, after the Temple authorities had repudiated Jesus? What can we learn from their behaviour?

2. How many Old Testament prophecies have their fulfilment announced in Peter's address in the Temple court (Acts 3:12–26)?

3. 'I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers' (Acts 3:17). In what sense did the rulers act in ignorance? Are they still held accountable? What can we learn from this?

4. 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name . . . by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). The exclusiveness of such a claim is frequently said to be offensive in a multicultural society. What is your comment on this? Think about this in relation to other religious groups in your society.

5. What are some of the conflicts in which we can become involved if we resolve on absolute loyalty to God first (4:19)?

6. If a street preacher in a modern city is charged by the police with causing an obstruction, can he appeal to the precedent of Peter and John in Acts 4:19, 20?

7. Would it be a desirable thing for a modern church to practise community of goods as the infant church of Jerusalem did?

8. What special gifts do we need from the Holy Spirit if we are to practise the ministry of encouragement? What is the difference between true encouragement and easy flattery?

Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 5–6

1. Consider the suggestion that Ananias' and Sapphira's offence plays in the early church the kind of role that Achan's offence played in Israel's settlement in Canaan (Joshua 7).

2. Lies can sometimes seem kind. Ought one to live one's life without ever speaking or practising a lie? Is it possible?

3. Could it be said to everyone guilty of an untruth, 'You have not lied to men but to God'?

4. Does Acts 5:31 stress an aspect of the saving work of Christ which is sometimes overlooked, since the purpose of his exaltation is here said to be 'to give repentance . . . and forgiveness of sins'?

5. Why was it necessary for men to be 'full of the Spirit and of wisdom' (6:3) in order to 'serve tables'? What are some modern equivalents within the church to this ministry? Pray together for those in your group and church whom God has called to this work.

6. 'A great many of the priests were obedient to the faith' (Acts 6:7). Would it have been in order for those priests to carry on their Temple duties after their conversion?

7. In Jerusalem there was tension between Hebrews and Hellenists: what tensions exist in your church? What practical steps could you take? Base your discussions on the practice of the Jerusalem church.

8. If the words of Stephen's accusers in Acts 6:14 represent his arguments with anything like accuracy, how could he have supported them? (Note that 'false witnesses' are people who bear witness against the truth, not necessarily people whose testimony is false in itself.)

Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 7–8

1. On the stoning of Stephen, Bernard Shaw remarked, 'It was a severe way of suppressing a tactless and conceited bore; but it was pardonable and human in comparison to the slaughter of poor Ananias and Sapphira'. What do you think?

2. Consider Stephen's presentation of the following characters in Old Testament history; Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon. What do you find most interesting and challenging about this?

3. How far could one say that Stephen's attitude to the Temple places him in the true succession to the great prophets of Israel?

4. When would you say it is right for Christians to spend money on church buildings, and when is it wrong?

5. Why may Simon Magus have wanted the Holy Spirit? What lessons and warnings are there in this incident?

6. The experience of the Samaritan believers, who were baptised during Philip's mission but did not receive the Spirit until the apostles laid their hands on them, has been used as a biblical basis for the distinction between baptism and confirmation. Do you agree?

7. Why do you think that verse 37 (see AV) was added to the original narrative of the Ethiopian's baptism in Acts 8:36–39?

8. What may Philip actually have said to the eunuch? Work out a conversation between the two men. How would you have dealt with this situation?

Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 9–10

1. Compare Luke's account of Saul's conversion with the apostle's own references to it in his epistles. Do you find any differences of emphasis? What lessons are there here for our Christian witness?

2. Compare Jesus' call to Paul on the road to Damascus with his calling of the disciples. Jesus' call comes in many ways. What would you say are the essential elements to a genuine call to follow Jesus? If in a group, share your own experiences.

3. What do you think Paul meant when he said, 'To live is Christ' (see notes on Acts 9:10–19a)?

4. What significance do you see in the fact that, although Paul was called to be distinctively the apostle to the Gentiles, it is Peter whom Luke records as first preaching the gospel to Gentiles?

5. God spoke to Peter in a vision, to Cornelius through 'a man . . . in bright apparel'. How does he speak to us today?

6. Both in Damascus, by near-simultaneous revelations to Saul and Ananias, and in Judea, by near-simultaneous revelations to Cornelius and Peter, God accomplishes his purposes. Can you think of any other instances of this mode of two-part revelation?

7. Can we learn lessons from Peter's presentation of the gospel in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:34–43) about the way in which it should be presented today? Think about your answer in relation to various groups in the locality of your church.

8. Why did the apostles see no need for a period of probation or 'catechumenate' between conversion and baptism? Is such a period desirable today?

9. 'God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean' (see notes on 10:9–16). In theory we say that all men are equally important but are there any groups or individuals whom you or your church treat as outcast by, in practice, ignoring their existence? Is there anything you can do about this?

Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 11–12

1. What 'new thing' would you like to see happening in your church (see notes on 11:1–18)? 'Brainstorm' some possibilities and pray for God to show you if he wants you to take any action.

2. Why, since Luke's space was limited, did he repeat in Acts 11:4–17 so many of the details already recorded in chapter 10?

3. There are many calls on our time, money and prayers. How can we know whom and what we should support? How does the story of Peter and Cornelius help?

4. Can you think of a present-day counterpart in western Christendom, or your own church, to the reluctance of some members of the Jerusalem church to welcome the evangelisation and incorporation of Gentiles?

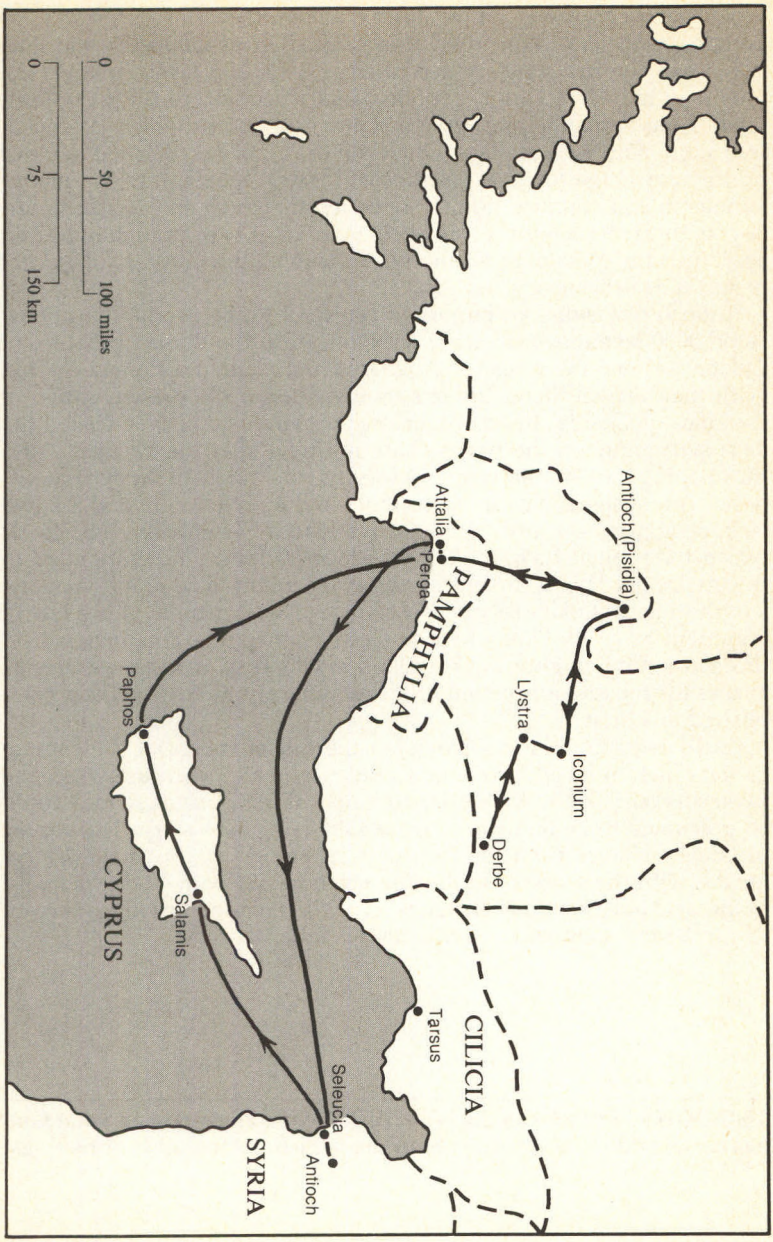
5. Since 'Christians' means 'adherents of Christ', what do we learn about the disciples at Antioch from the fact that 'Christians' was what their neighbours called them? What does this say to us?

6. 'The word of God grew and multiplied' (Acts 12:24). Consider the suitability of this statement as a summary of the main theme of Acts.

7. What can we learn about prayer from Peter's imprisonment and escape?

8. What do you believe about guardian angels? Study the teaching of the Bible on this subject.

Paul's first missionary journey



Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 13–14

1. Do you believe that fasting can be helpful? Ought it to be an essential part of a Christian's life? Why is it not widely practised in the Western church today?

2. What lessons can we learn from Acts 13:1–3 about the proper response to a missionary call today?

3. Many of us cannot travel to evangelise other people, as Paul and Barnabas did. But what important back-up work is needed?

4. Examine Paul's quotations in Acts 13:33, 34, 35, 41 and 47. What do they teach us about his approach to the Old Testament?

5. 'Neglect of spiritual truth is not always due to ignorance. Sometimes we can know it too well' (Ralph Martin on Acts 13:27). Discuss any experience you have of this.

6. Compare Barnabas' and Paul's preaching to the people of Lystra (14:15–17) with what Paul says in Romans 1:19–23 about the knowledge of the true God which was accessible to pagans. Can this 'natural revelation' still be appealed to in the gospel preaching?

7. We are not told in Acts 14:23 what criteria Barnabas and Paul looked for in the elders whom they appointed. What probable criteria are there elsewhere in the New Testament?

8. In what ways did Paul care for new converts (14:22, 23; also see the Letter to Galatians)? Discuss ways in which you were helped, or not helped, when you first became a Christian. Is there anything more your church could do to help those who have recently been converted?

9. 'Turn. . . to a living God' (14:15). If someone said to you, 'Prove to me that your God is living', what would you say?

Paul's second missionary journey

Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 15–16

1. The gospel is about surrender and trust, not achievement (15:9). Dependence on status, success and external roles is a sign of worldliness. Discuss how we can stop these worldly qualities creeping into our churches and Christian organisations.

2. Naturally, we reject the condition laid down for salvation by the visitors of Acts 15:1. What is our response to those who say, 'Unless you are baptised according to the ordinance of Christ, you cannot be saved'? What would Paul's response have been?

3. Are the food-restrictions laid down by the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:29) binding on Christians today? Or would this be a form of legalism – and, if so, was it not a form of legalism then?

4. How did the Holy Spirit guide the Assembly (25, 28)? How do we genuinely make provision for him to guide our meetings?

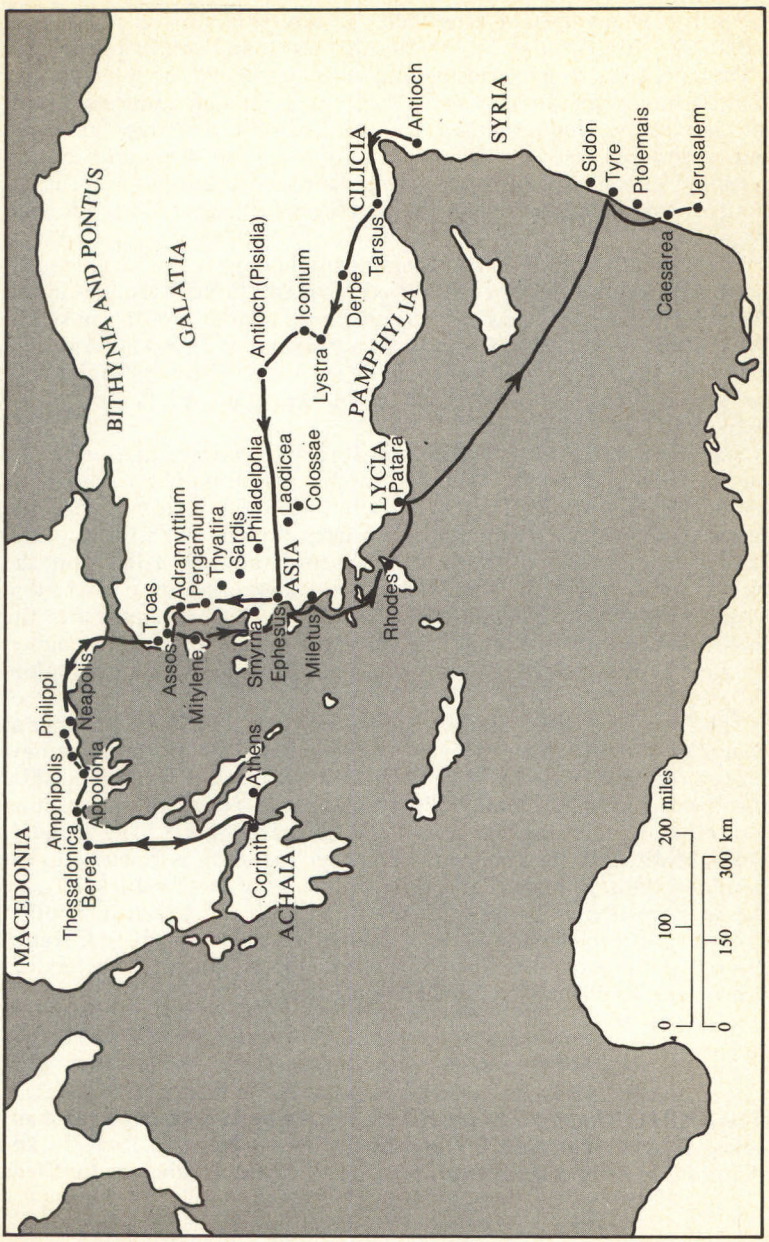
5. Are you disposed to take sides in the 'sharp contention' which arose between Paul and Barnabas over Mark? If so, which of them would you support, and why?

6. Why was Paul annoyed at the slave-girl's public declaration about him and his companions, since it was so manifestly true?

7. How does the narrative of Acts 16:11–40 help to provide a background against which Paul's letter to the Philippians can be more intelligently read?

8. An actress and ex-alcoholic has written, 'I ran away from reality into fantasy. Reality was always painful. I felt there was something missing inside me. I thought a career, a husband, a child, would fill the gap, but they didn't.' Do you think this is true of everyone? How could an awareness of this affect our Christian work?

Paul's third missionary journey



Question for further study and discussion on chapters 17–18

1. Is it a good thing for Christians to speak of themselves as 'turning the world upside down' (Acts 17:6), if we consider that the words originally carried a charge of subversion? What do these words indicate about New Testament Christianity?

2. Is the example of the Beroean Jews, 'examining the scriptures . . . to see if these things were so' (Acts 17:11), one to be followed in respect of all teaching that we receive, spoken or written, regardless of who the teacher may be? Or should our attitude sometimes be, 'If he says it, it's true'?

3. In the light of 1 Corinthians 2:1–5, it has been suggested that Paul felt he had taken the wrong line at Athens. Do you agree?

4. Have there been any times in your life when apparent disasters have been overruled by God for good (see note on Acts 18:1–4)? What have you learnt from these times?

5. Acts 18:17, especially in the AV rendering, 'And Gallio cared for none of these things', has often provided a text for gospel preachers wishing to warn their hearers against spiritual apathy. Is this justified?

6. Compare the account of Apollos in Acts 18:24–28 with references to him elsewhere in the New Testament. What do you find encouraging and challenging in the story of Apollos?

7. What would you say were the biggest problems facing Paul as he preached in Athens and Corinth? In what ways is the situation in our cities similar, and in what ways different?

8. What particular opportunities and dangers face Christians who are on show to the public in the performing arts, the media, politics or sports? Pray for any Christians who you know are witnessing in these areas.

Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 19–20

1. Do you think the 'disciples' whom Paul found in Ephesus (Acts 19:1) were disciples of Jesus or disciples of John?

2. Paul used the siesta-time to preach (19:9). How do we, and how should we, spend our leisure time? What principles does the Bible give?

3. What do you make of the healing worked by God through Paul's handkerchiefs or aprons (Acts 19:12)?

4. 'I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches' (19:13). Do we ever indulge in 'the folly of borrowed religion'? How can it happen? How can we avoid it, in ourselves or in others?

5. The town clerk of Ephesus declared that Paul and his companions were not 'blasphemers of our goddess' (Acts 19:37). A fourth-century expositor (Chrysostom) thought this was said merely to calm the mob; on this view Paul must certainly have spoken against the goddess. What do you think, bearing in mind what you know of Paul? What are the implications for our preaching of the gospel?

6. In our lives is there anything that is equivalent to the 'magic books' (19:19)? Why are we reluctant to destroy it?

7. Collect the parallels that you can find in Paul's letters to what he says to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:18–35.

8. What evidence do the later writings of the New Testament provide of fulfilment of Paul's warnings in Acts 20:29, 30? And what evidence is there in the modern church?

Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 21–22

1. 'Both Paul and his Christian friends claimed the Spirit's guidance (20:22; 21:4, 11), yet reached opposite conclusions.' What do we learn from this?

2. Why did Agabus dramatise his message? What place does drama have in the ministry of the church?

3. Have you any misgivings about Paul's readiness to take part in a Jewish rite (Acts 21:23–26)? How far should we share in the interests and practices of those we are trying to reach?

4. 'There is a time when compromise is not a sign of weakness but strength' (William Barclay). Do you think this was true of Paul in Acts 21:27–39? Discuss other times when it may be true.

5. What means does the Lord employ to convince us today that the way in which we think ourselves best fitted to serve him is not, in fact, the way he has chosen for us?

6. Pray for anybody you know who may be seeking God's guidance at the moment.

7. In Acts we see the constant outbreak of passionate, sincere but misguided group action (e.g. 21:30). How can we guard against being led astray like this ourselves?

8. Do we gather from Acts 22:16 that it is baptism that washes away a person's sins? How does the baptismal practice of your church convey the aspect of cleansing?

Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 23–24

1. When do you think it is right for Christians to stand up for themselves, and when is it wrong?

2. Do you think Paul was justified in setting the Pharisees and Sadducees against each other as he did (Acts 23:6)?

3. Is the test of 23:9 valid today? How may a claim to fresh revelation and new truth be judged?

4. Examine carefully Claudius Lysias's letter to Felix (Acts 23:26–30) and consider how he arranges the facts so as to set his own part in the best possible light. Is not this our common practice when we relate events which involve ourselves? How can we avoid it?

5. Consider further the accounts given by Tertullus (Acts 24:2–8) and by Paul himself (Acts 24:10–21) regarding the same course of events. How would an unprejudiced judge determine which account was more faithful to the facts?

6. Pray for all who make and administer our laws. What difficulties do they face?

7. Consider the use of the term 'the Way', in Acts 24:14, 22 and elsewhere in the book, and assess its appropriateness as a designation for Christianity.

8. What impression is given of Felix's character by the part he plays in the narrative of Acts?

Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 25–26

1. One striking fact about Paul is that, despite the injustice with which he was treated, he was never sorry for himself. Discuss the harm that self-pity can bring about, its cause and cure.

2. There are injustices in society today. Discuss any that particularly concern you. Is there anything you or your group can do about them?

3. What features in Paul's account of his conversion and apostleship in Acts 26:9–23 are specially suited to his present audience?

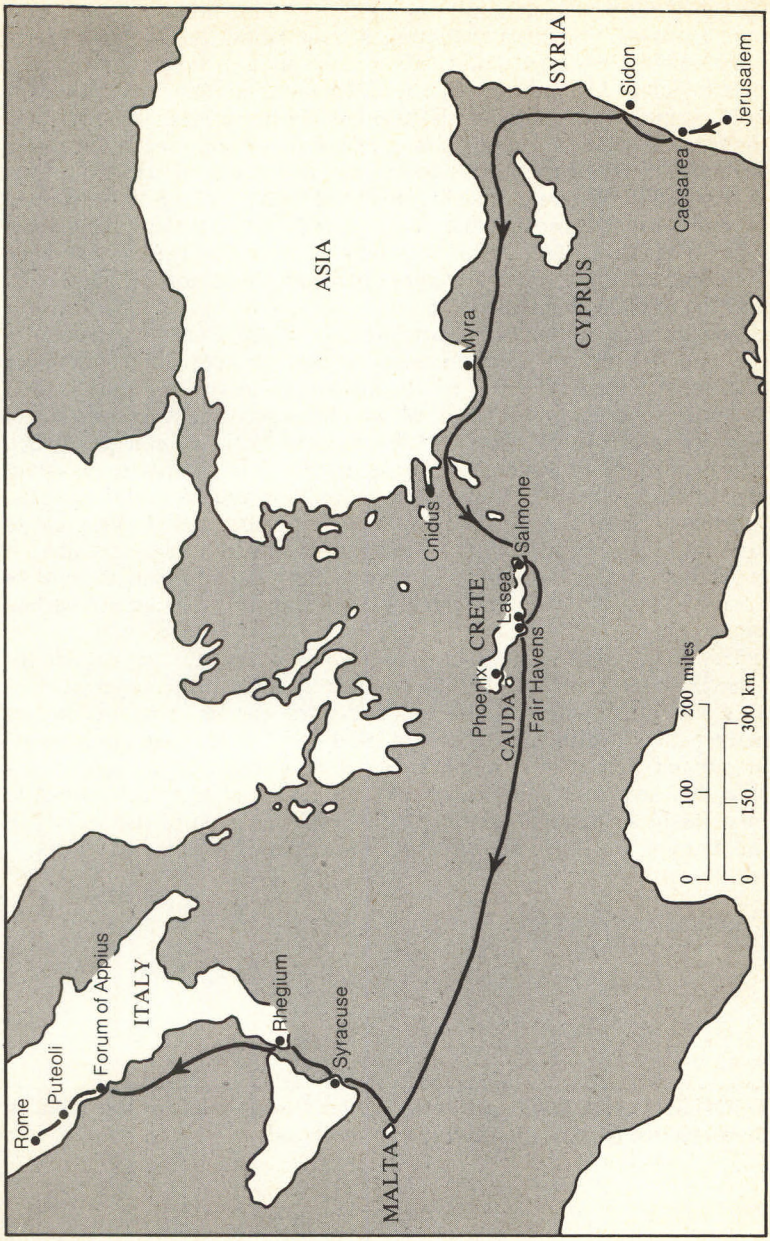
4. In the narrative of the call of Paul (Acts 26:16–18) there are echoes of the words in which God called a number of his servants in Old Testament times. How many can you trace in these verses?

5. 'Before we can witness to people, we must understand them'. Do you think this statement is always true, sometimes true, partially true? How can we come to understand people?

6. How does Paul's missionary passion come through in his speech before Agrippa? Pray for missionaries you know, that they may keep their vision and passion. How may these be destroyed?

7. In Agrippa's words, 'This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar' (Acts 26:32), some readers have seen a sinister implication, as though he meant, 'But now, by appealing to Nero, he has sealed his own doom.' What do you think?

Paul's journey to Rome



Questions for further study and discussion on chapters 27–28

1. What light does the story of the voyage and shipwreck in Acts 27 shed on the character of Paul?

2. Prepare a series of interviews, stories and readings, as if you were doing a televised 'This is Your Life' of Paul.

3. 'And so we came to Rome' (Acts 28:14). Go back to Acts 19:21 and consider the unforeseen and circuitous ways in which Paul realised his purpose to see Rome. What can we learn from this about the ways of God?

4. Consider how the story of Paul's interview with the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome (Acts 28:23–28) sums up themes which have dominated the whole narrative of Acts.

5. Why do you think Luke does not tell us what happened at the end of the 'two whole years' of Acts 28:30?

6. Other titles have been suggested for the book of Acts. What would you call it, and why?

7. What does the book reveal about its author, Luke?

8. 'Hospitality is variously regarded as a "fine art", a joyous privilege, an unwelcome necessity, or an opportunity for display. The New Testament writers emphasise its importance as a Christian grace and as a species of evangelistic service' (C. R. Erdman). When in Acts has hospitality been particularly used by God to further his work? When is Christian hospitality particularly needed today?