



# Postcards from Paul

## Preaching through Paul's Second Missionary Journey

**Why not follow Paul's travels in Acts, and link them to his letters? pondered PHIL CAMPBELL. Here's what happens when you do...**

### THE PERILS OF PREACHING ACTS

No animals were harmed in the production of this series of sermons on the book of Acts. And apart from one angry departure our church remained intact as well. But there's no doubt about it, preaching through Acts is a dangerous business. You'll either relish the thought, or shrink from it; Acts is a great playground if you've got a pentecostal-style theological barrow to push. Otherwise (tacitly accepting that the barrow-pushers have the upper hand) you'll be tempted to stay well clear.

Be encouraged it's worth it. And, especially in this part of the book (Paul's second missionary journey), some of the hard issues fade into the background. Having covered most of the hard yards, I've discovered one good rule-of-thumb. It's often said that we need to take care not to confuse the descriptive with the prescriptive in Acts. That may be helpful, but it's a distinction that can be difficult to explain, and difficult to apply. I found that a better approach was to work at discerning the difference between the ordinary, and the extraordinary.

Sadly for those with more romantic notions, the real Christian life is quite an ordinary business. And for most Christians in the time of Acts, things were no different. *The average Christian was ordinary then, too.*

But that, of course, is exactly the point. Acts is a book about the APOSTLES. And very clearly, the Apostles have extraordinary authority, and extraordinary abilities. Acts 19:11 reminds us of this:

*God did extraordinary miracles through Paul. Handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him*

*were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.*

Try as hard as you like - I'll be you don't have the power to heal with the touch of your used Kleenex. In fact, get too close to my used handkerchief and you'll probably suffer the reverse! In short Luke is offering a superb apologia for Paul's *apostolic authority* at times, consciously mirroring the words and actions of Jesus, and of Peter in the first part of Acts. Clearly, the apostles are carrying on the mission of Jesus Christ with the *authority* of Jesus, establishing the gospel and stamping it with the unmistakable mark of the Holy Spirit. It is this same gospel we proclaim today, confident of its authority and authenticity because of the credentials of those who first preached it.

### A PART OF THE WHOLE

I've broken the book of Acts into four distinct sections, each one of which became a series of sermons and bible studies. In this feature, we'll be looking in detail at part c), which can easily be taken as a series in its own right.

a) Acts 1-9 A Kingdom for all the Earth

b) Acts 10-15 A Gospel for the Gentiles

c) Acts 16-19 Postcards from Paul

d) Acts 20-25 Chained Messenger, Unchained Message

Chapters 1 to 15 have set the scene, detailing the growth and spread of the gospel, with a particular focus on the ministry and leadership of the Apostle Peter, culminating in the Jerusalem council. The Gentile mission really gets underway with the conversion of Paul, who is the focus of what is often called the second missionary journey in Acts 16 to 19. The

significant thing about this journey, though, isn't so much that it's his second rather, in these four chapters, we meet in real life the people who are to later become the recipients of many of Paul's letters. And that's the thrust of the Postcards from Paul series.

## TAKE A LETTER

After we followed Paul on each stage of his journey from Philippi to Thessalonica, through Berea and Athens to Corinth and Ephesus, we paused at each stage to look at the letters Paul wrote back to the churches he'd established. In other words, it wasn't really just a series on Acts—it also encompassed Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians and Ephesians. Naturally, the epistles weren't covered in great depth. Rather, we simply looked for points of contact between the events in Acts, and Paul's message in the Epistles. And there were many.

This was a series with some unusual aims.

- From the outset, I decided I would be more than happy if we could achieve at least a partial integration of the New Testament, linking Acts to the later epistles. This worked very well.
- Secondly, I was hoping to breathe some historical life into Paul's world and letters. This worked well too.

For example, when you've just flinched at the account of Paul's flogging in Philippi, his reminiscences in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-2 spring to life with a new force

*We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.*

Daring indeed—when you can still feel the sting of the lashes!

Even with those limited aims, it was a series rich in cross currents and sub-themes. We touched on issues like predestination (Thessalonians), the way we bring the gospel to our culture (Athens), and Christian unity (Paul and Apollos in Acts 18 and 1 Corinthians)—every week was new and fresh, and the series had plenty of variety.

## RESOURCES

- *Paul, Apostle of the Free Spirit*, (FF Bruce) a useful companion through the series, because this book does much the same.
- *The Message of Acts*, BST series (JRW Stott) nicely paced, and quite thorough. As always, the BST series is useful when preaching.
- *ACTS, NICNT Series* (FF Bruce) sometimes repetitious if you're also using *Apostle of the Free Spirit*, but very thorough.

## SERIES BREAKUP

1. **Acts 16** (Philippi) *Idiots in Philippi*
2. **Philippians** *Chain Letter*
3. **Acts 17:1-14** (Thessalonica) *Reason to Believe*
4. **1 Thessalonians 1** *Chosen By God*
5. **Acts 17:15-34** (Athens) *Meet the Unknown God*
6. **Acts 18 AND 1 Corinthians 1** *Crisis in Corinth*
7. **Acts 19** (Ephesus) *Careful Christianity*
8. **Ephesians** *All You Need to Know*

## OUTLINES

### Sermon 1 - Acts 16 (Philippi)

#### *Idiots in Philippi*

*Key Idea* Paul and Silas are very unusual! They rejoice in prison, and show more concern for their Philippian jailer than for their own freedom—as a result, the jailer is converted. What would happen if we were more often unusual in our behaviour?

#### 1. You idiot!

As tennis player Pat Rafter was presented with an award for fair play, live on Australian television, the President of Tennis Australia explained how Pat had ultimately lost a \$30,000 match because of his honesty in overruling an umpire's decision that had originally gone in his favour. As the story was told, a wag at the back of the audience yelled YOU IDIOT!

That's how the world sees any action that puts somebody else first. Christians are called to be idiots like that all the time—as we'll see when we look at the unusual actions of Paul and Silas when they're thrown into prison.

#### 2. Paul's vision (16:9-10)

- come and help us
- we'll go and preach the gospel

### 3. On to Philippi

- Lydia (v11-15)
- Fortune told, fortune lost
- Idiots in jail
  - Singing and praying
  - Whose side are they on?

### 4. Being Unusual for Jesus

If you're a Christian who's keen on sharing your faith, you DREAM of an opportunity like Paul and Silas had, don't you. The Philippian jailer threw himself at their feet, and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved.' If only it was always that easy. If only people came up to you at the office, and they said, 'okay, tell me, what do I have to do to be saved.'

You know, I reckon it might happen a bit more often if we were a bit more serious about being the sort of IDIOTS that Paul and Silas were. Not playing by the usual rules of just caring about YOURSELF. Not playing by the usual rules of DOING WHAT'S BEST FOR ME, but being serious about being like Jesus.



## Sermon 2 - Philippians

### Chain Letter

*Key idea: The Philippians had seen Paul under attack, suffering from the gospel while he was with them.*

*Now he says, YOU DO THE SAME! Put others first even when it hurts.*

#### 1. Under attack

A few months ago in Laos, three Americans, a Frenchman and a Thai national were arrested along with 55 locals, and charged with ILLEGAL ASSEMBLY, and slandering the nation's leaders. They were arrested after the police raided the house where they were having a BIBLE STUDY. According to a government spokesman, they're also going to be charged with causing division, because by holding a bible study and evangelising, they're claiming their religion is better than others. Which contradicts the communist law of Laos. In prison for going to bible study. But it's not just in Laos people face persecution for following Jesus, is it. If you've got kids at High

School, ask them what it's like. The sort of pressure, the sort of abuse you face, if you're clear about the fact you're a Christian. Enough, unless you've got a lot of guts, to make you back off. And pretend you're not a Christian at all.

We know already, don't we - this is nothing new. And if you were here last week you'll remember we saw it; we saw it in Acts 16, as Paul and Silas and Timothy and Luke hit town in Philippi. All they wanted to do was TELL PEOPLE THE GOSPEL; talk about Jesus. But they're whipped. And thrown into jail. When he writes to the Philippians, he tells them they'll face the same

#### 2. Paul's Letter

- **to the Christians in Philippi**
- **real history, real people, real events**
- **from a repeat offender!**
- **The Philippians face the same as they saw HIM having! (Phil 1:29)**

#### 3. Suffering for Jesus - a guide

- **looking back to the pattern**
- **ask, How can I use this for the gospel**
- **concern for others (Phil 2:1-4)**
- **have the same attitude as Jesus!**
- **following Paul's example (3:17, 4:9)**

The Philippians have watched Paul's suffering. Now he calls them to learn from it. Have a look over at chapter 3; verse 17. He says 'Join with others in FOLLOWING MY EXAMPLE, brothers, and TAKE NOTE OF THOSE who live according to the pattern we gave you. When you see this stuff in me, when you see people living according to the pattern Paul and Silas set in Philippi, let me tell you, there's NO COPYRIGHT. He says, COPY IT WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT. You do the same.

Same in 4 verse 9. Read what he says. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - PUT IT INTO PRACTICE. Do it. Which means, folks, if you're copping a hard time at school for the fact you're a Christian, Paul says, LOOK AT WHAT I DID. And you do the same. He says, learn what it means when you're being jeered at and heckled to stop looking at YOUR PROBLEM. And start caring for the person doing the abusing. Tough, isn't it. To think to yourself in the middle of all that, WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP THIS GUY; to show him what Jesus is like.

#### 5. The bit he wished he didn't have to write

- **don't be divided**
- **put your own preferences aside**

## Sermon 3 - Acts 17<sup>1-14</sup> (Thessalonica)

### Reason to Believe

*Key idea: There's an intriguing interplay between the conversion of the Thessalonians as portrayed here in Acts, and the account Paul gives as he looks back.*

*Here, there's an emphasis on the human activity of preaching, arguing and persuading. Next week it's the*

other side of the coin. If we want to see churches grow, we need to be both **DARING** and **CLEAR** in the way we present the gospel.

### 1. Sinking Statistics

The most recent national church life survey says that the ANGLICAN CHURCH has actually grown over the last 10 years or so; by about 7 percent. The PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH has grown by 3.9. Which might sound okay, except they're both far less than the rate of population growth. In other words, when you do all the maths, we're shrinking.

But there was another statistic that was even more of a worry, and it probably accounts for the first one. And that is, among Anglicans, only ONE IN TEN who filled out the survey said that they ever tried to SPEAK ABOUT THEIR FAITH to unbelievers. 90% just CLAM UP and say nothing. And my guess is, with Presbyterians it's even worse. So in a church with 60 people coming on a Sunday morning, there'll maybe just be three people who are prepared to speak about their faith. No wonder churches don't grow.

There are a couple of key things we really need if we're going to change that. First of all, we need to be MORE DARING. And second, we need to be MORE CLEAR. And you see both of those things in the Apostle Paul as he comes to the city of Thessalonica. In the province of Macedonia. The north of Greece.

### 2. Daring to Speak (1 Thessalonians 2:1-2)

#### 3. A Clear Message (Acts 17:1-4)

- reasoned from the scriptures (17:2)
- explaining (17:3)
- proving (17:3)

#### 4. Reasonable Doubt (Acts 17:10-14)

- don't be afraid to ask questions!
- The Bereans examined the scriptures to see if what Paul said was true. Will YOU do the same?

### 5. Building up your Faith Muscles

Don't just suck stuff up uncritically! LISTEN. CHECK IT OUT. Check it out against your Bible. Examine the scriptures. And see if this stuff's true. Instead of just HALF BELIEVING. And HALF DOUBTING. So you're never quite sure whether you can say ANYTHING. To ANYONE. This is a big issue. Be prepared to give your faith a GOOD SHAKE, by going back to your bible and putting your TOUGH QUESTIONS. Do it to ME as well. Whatever you're chewing over, chew it over with me. You are ALLOWED to ask questions. You're allowed to DOUBT. You're allowed to tussle with things; it makes sense, doesn't it. Because it's the only way you end up with answers you can share with anyone else. If you don't exercise your faith, if you never stretch you'll never grow. You'll never be able to present the gospel clearly, because you'll never get it clear for your self. You'll never dare to speak because you'll never be quite sure. Exercise your faith muscles!



## Sermon 4 - 1 Thessalonians I Chosen By God

*Key Idea* While the account we saw last week in Acts emphasised Paul's role in preaching the gospel and persuading the Thessalonians, as Paul looks back and recounts what happened in his letter, he is very clear that it was GOD'S WORK to change the hearts of the Thessalonians. The fact that the Holy Spirit turned their hearts to the gospel is clear evidence that they were chosen by God.

### 1. Picking Teams

There's a McDonald's ad on TV; and I wonder if you've noticed it. There's a bunch of kids in the school playground, choosing teams. For a game of basketball. There's the team captain and his mate; chewing gum. Bouncing the ball and they're looking over a row of kids waiting to be picked. One short kid. And a whole row of tall ones. The captain's mate whispers in his ear. He says, PICK TOMMY. The little guy. PICK TOMMY. Tommy looks like he'd be the last guy you'd choose for a basketball team. Pick Tommy. And the captain says WHY? And his mate says to him, HIS DAD always takes the whole team to McDonald's after every game. And so little Tommy is IN THE TEAM. Now it's one thing to be choosing people for a basketball team, isn't it. And that's bad enough if you're one of the type of people who's shorter than everyone else, or not as sporty. But in the passage we're looking at today, we're coming to one of the most controversial doctrines in the whole bible. One that some Christians just don't want to accept. And that is, that GOD CHOOSES. That God chooses his team.

And as soon as you say those words, the arguments start. But that's not FAIR that God chooses people. I mean, what about the people he DOESN'T choose? Or

Doesn't that just make people ROBOTS who don't even get to make up their own minds? Or, If God chooses people, then how come the Bible says we're meant to EVANGELISE? And from that, two opposite extreme views. The ones who say, well, God chooses so it's God's business who becomes a Christian. So I don't need to talk about my faith to ANYONE. Or the oppo-

site. NO WAY I'm going to accept the idea that God chooses people. It's all up to ME. To turn other people into Christians.

Well, let's look at the passage. And let God's word speak for itself. Does God choose? Or not.

**2. We know he has chosen (1v4)**

- you chose? Or God chose?
- See also John 15, Acts 9, Romans 9 etc

**3. But have I been chosen?**

- we know because
  - the gospel came with power
  - the Holy Spirit and deep conviction
  - with joy given by the Spirit
- recognising God's word as God's word

**4. Our Response**

- Give Thanks
- Preach more, not less
- Realise
  - A) it's not up to us
  - B) It's not by merit
  - C) so keep praying!

**Sermon 5 - Acts 17:15-34 (Athens)**

*Introducing the Unknown God*

*Key Idea: We need to be in touch with our society if we are going to build effective bridges for the gospel. Paul works hard to introduce the unknown God to Athens. NOTICE in Paul's speech the nice ironic interplay between the God who made us, and the gods that we make.*

**1. Staying in Touch**

The Queen's High Chancellor announced the famous singer as Sir John Elton when he received a knighthood living in the ivory tower he had never heard of Elton John! Sometimes, Christians are the same priding ourselves on the fact that we are shut off from the world around us. Paul's approach in Athens is the exact opposite.

**2. Paul in Athens**

- a city full of idols and ideas
- Paul's distress
- To the markets, to the Areopagus

**3. Making contact**

- the unknown God made known
- knowing the God who made you
- turn back, or be judged

**4. Our Message today**

- and our methods today
- We must make sure we understand the culture around us so that we can make effective contact. But our gospel remains the same REPENT, and trust in Jesus.

**Sermon 6-Acts 18, I Corinthians 1  
Crisis in Corinth**

*Key idea: Everything we read about Corinth in Acts sounds terrific. Paul makes a great start there, Apollos follows. But it's not the way we start that's important it's the way we finish. By the time we get to I Corinthians, it's tragic that Paul has to correct the church for splitting into factions over leadership. Paul and Apollos are united in the gospel they preach (a point emphasised in Acts) the Corinthian divisions prove they are unspiritual.*

**1. The Melbourne Grand Prix and church**

This year's Melbourne Grand Prix got off to a great start, but it was marred by the finish, when teammates staged a tame one-two line-crossing. Sometimes, good starts can be ruined by a bad finish. The church in Corinth got off to a great start

**2. A Great Start in Corinth**

- a ready made team
  - Aquilla, Priscilla, Paul and Silas
- quick results
  - many converts, including one big catch (the synagogue ruler)
- re-assurance from God
- 18 months of bible teaching from Paul

**3. Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong**

- Paul goes to Ephesus with Aquilla and Priscilla
- Apollos goes to Corinth
  - So far so good, but

**4. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians**

- taking sides (I Corinthians 1:10)
- proving they are unspiritual (I Cor 3)

**5. Lessons to Learn**

No matter how well things might be going in our church, we always need to be careful to maintain unity. If we lose it, everything else can evaporate!



## Sermon 7 - Acts 19 (Ephesus)

### Careful Christianity

*Key idea: Acts 19 presents us with three examples of non-genuine articles – disciples who are not really disciples, the seven sons of Sceva who try to pass themselves off as apostles, and Artemis, who claims to be a god. We must take care that we are not fooled by fakes.*

#### 1. Foam on the Grange?

Grange Hermitage is Australia's most expensive wine, selling for thousands of dollars a bottle. Recently a wine merchant discovered a counterfeit bottle that looked exactly like genuine Grange, except for a spelling mistake on the back label. If we are not careful, we can be taken in by things that are not quite the genuine article. In Acts 19 we meet some Christians who are not quite the real thing, some apostles who are not quite the real thing and a counterfeit god.

#### 2. Genuine Christianity?

This is one of the most tricky sections in Acts – disciples of John, who have only had John's baptism. From here, the Charismatic movement draws the doctrine of second baptism. But clearly, as Paul questions them, they haven't yet understood what it means to put their faith in the resurrected Christ. Receiving the Holy Spirit ALWAYS COMES with repentance AND FAITH IN CHRIST JESUS. Repentance alone – which came with John's baptism – is never enough. As Paul explains later in Acts 20, he preached repentance AND FAITH IN CHRIST. And it's faith in Christ that these seeming disciples were lacking. Paul's apostolic confirmation, and the visible coming of the Spirit, served to consolidate and highlight the fact that there's only ONE TRUE GOSPEL – repent, AND TRUST IN JESUS. It's the same gospel today.

#### 3. Genuine Apostle? (Acts 19:11-22)

Others tried to do what Paul did, with no success. The things Paul did were EXTRAORDINARY. We are simply ORDINARY CHRISTIANS, so we should TAKE NOTICE OF THE APOSTLES and what they say. We are to be obedient hearers of the Apostle's words – which we have in the New Testament.

#### 4. Genuine God? (Acts 19:23-41)

The goddess Artemis is no god at all! Only Jesus is the true God.

#### 5. A Final Word of Warning (Acts 20:29-30)

As Paul later meets with the Ephesian elders, he warns them to be careful of fakes! False teachers, false Christians, pseudo apostles and fake gods are everywhere. We need to always be on our guard. It can be tiring to be CAREFULLY CHRISTIANS – but it's very important if we're going to guard the gospel.



## Sermon 8 - Ephesians

### All You Need to Know

*KEY IDEA: God is not a God of mystery, but of revelation. As Paul writes to Ephesus, a city rich in mystery-religion traditions, he is at pains to point out that the gospel is a mystery revealed! The mystery is, that through the gospel Jews and Gentiles are brought together as ONE BODY! Christianity is not about spooky secrets, but unity as followers of Jesus.*

#### 1. Don't you love a good mystery?

Take a look at the weekly TV guide, and you'll know most people just love a good mystery. If it's not Inspector Wexford or Inspector Dalglish, it's the X-Files or Tales of the Unexplained – if you prefer real life mystery, there's Roger Climpson's Australia's Most Wanted. People like mystery in their religion too – a bit of hocus pocus, a sense of mystery and awe, because that's what God is like – isn't it? NO! God is a God of REVELATION rather than mystery.

#### 2. Paul and Ephesus

- magical mystery scrolls (we saw them burned in Acts 19 – but have they really given up their old ideas?)
- a church of Jews, Gentiles, ex-magicians

#### 3. Paul's Letter

- you want mystery? Here it is
  - Ephesians 1:9
  - Ephesians 3:3,4,6

The mystery is – that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel – members of one body

#### 4. The Mystery of Unity

- not spooky, not a secret – but unity as followers of Jesus is what it's all about!

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*Phil Campbell is the pastor of Maclean Presbyterian Church in Northern New South Wales, and the editor of Perspective.*  
philcam@nor.com.au