

ACTS

Chapters 16–28





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We believe that the Bible has God for its author; salvation for its end; and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter and that all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. To review LifeWay's doctrinal guideline, please visit lifeway.com/doctrinalguideline.

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CONTENTS

<i>About This Study</i>	4
<i>General Editor</i>	4
<i>About the Book of Acts</i>	5
Session 1 Value All (<i>Acts 16:16-19; Psalm 139:13-16</i>)	6
Session 2 Incomplete Picture (<i>Acts 18:24-28; 19:1-7</i>)	16
Session 3 Delivered (<i>Acts 20:22-35</i>)	26
Session 4 The Testimony (<i>Acts 22:3-8,15-22</i>)	36
Session 5 Answering Critics (<i>Acts 26:19-29</i>)	46
Session 6 Always on Mission (<i>Acts 28:17-28</i>)	56
<i>Leader Guide</i>	66
<i>Tips for Leading a Group</i>	78

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The Book of Acts has often been referred to as the acts of the apostles or the acts of the Holy Spirit. We could also refer to it as the continuing acts of Jesus.

Acts 1:1 describes the Gospel of Luke as a narrative of “all that Jesus began to do and teach.” The Book of Acts, then, also written by Luke, is the continuing story of what Jesus is doing. Even today He’s still at work advancing His kingdom through His church.

The **Explore the Bible** series will help you know and apply the encouraging and empowering truth of God’s Word. Each session is organized in the following way.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT: This page explains the original circumstances and setting of the session’s focal passage and identifies the primary themes.

EXPLORE THE TEXT: This page introduces the session’s Bible passage, providing helpful commentary and encouraging thoughtful interaction with God through His Word.

APPLY THE TEXT: This page helps you and your group members apply the truths you’ve explored. It’s not enough to know what the Bible says. God’s Word has the power to change your life.

DAILY EXPLORATION: Go deeper into God’s Word, building on the group experience. Engage in these daily Bible studies, reflect on the questions, record your thoughts, and take action.

OBEY THE TEXT: These pages provide opportunities to obey the Scriptures you’ve studied by responding to questions, memorizing verses, journaling, and praying.

LEADER GUIDE: This final section provides discussion starters and suggested questions to help someone lead a group study.



GENERAL EDITOR

Daniel L. Akin is the president and a professor of preaching and theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Akin earned degrees from Criswell College (BA), Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (MDiv), and the University of Texas at Arlington (PhD). He has written numerous books, including *Engaging Exposition*.

ABOUT THE BOOK OF ACTS

In Acts 1:8 our Lord told His disciples that when the Holy Spirit came on them, as He did in chapter 2, they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Chapters 16–28 are the record of the gospel’s advance to the ends of the earth. What began in Jerusalem (see chap. 1) would make its way to Rome (see chap. 28). What started with the Jews would make its way to the Gentiles. What started with a focus on Peter (see chaps. 1–12) would conclude with a focus on Paul (see chaps. 13–28). The Holy Spirit would direct every step. The Lord Jesus would be exalted at every turn. The gospel would go forth in unstoppable power. Opposition, false teachings, persecution, imprisonment, and perils at sea wouldn’t impede the spread of the gospel and the growth of the kingdom of God.

Acts is the history book of the New Testament. It provides vital information about the early church. We learn so many valuable lessons as we travel through its twenty-eight chapters. Several stand out.

1. God is sovereign, and His plan to reach the nations with the gospel will succeed.
2. The work of the Holy Spirit is essential to the advance of God’s mission.
3. God calls ordinary people to do extraordinary works that reveal His greatness and glory.
4. The gospel is a compelling message that demands a response. Neutrality isn’t an option.
5. The work of taking the gospel of the kingdom to the ends of the earth isn’t finished. The mission of Acts will be finished only when the One who ascended in chapter 1 returns.

Our role in God’s story is clear. Live in the power of the Spirit, bear witness to Christ, and watch what our God does through the obedience of His people.



For helps on how to use *Explore the Bible*, tips on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading, visit ministrygrid.com/web/explorethebible.

Value All

Christ values every person, so we shouldn't exploit or disregard other people.

Acts 16:16-19; Psalm 139:13-16



What do our responses to a person's image reveal about whom we value and why?

Our lives are bombarded with images of people. Every day celebrities and people we've never met flash across our social-media feeds and the news. Some images cause us to take a second look. Some move us to empathy. Some images we just pass over without trying to understand the significance of the image or the person.

► UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

This lesson brings together passages from Acts and Psalms. Acts 16 records an incident that took place on Paul's second missionary journey. Paul, Silas, and others had arrived in Philippi, a city without a synagogue. Some Jewish women met outside the city by the river. Lydia, a member of this group, was converted to Christianity as a result of Paul's teaching. Paul continued to go to this place outside the city walls to join these women for prayer. At some point Paul encountered a slave girl who "had a spirit by which she predicted the future" (v. 16); this description implies demonic possession. She began following Paul and the missionaries as they preached, calling out that the men were servants of God and that their message was the way of salvation. When Paul cast the spirit from her, the girl's owners became upset with Paul, knowing the girl was no longer profitable to them (see v. 19). This story set the background for the arrest of Paul and Silas and their experience in the Philippian jail.

The second passage in this lesson is from Psalm 139. In the first section of this psalm (see vv. 1-6), the psalmist reflected on God's unlimited knowledge and humanity's inability to grasp what God knows. In the second section (see vv. 7-12) the psalmist contemplated God's omnipresence, concluding that because God is everywhere, He's always available to lead and protect (see v. 10).

In the third section (see vv. 13-18) the psalmist reflected on God's active involvement in his conception and birth. God's intricate craftsmanship demonstrated the value God placed on the psalmist as a person created in His image. The last section (see vv. 19-22) dramatically shifts in tone. The psalmist issued a call to stand with God against evil in the world. God's enemies were his enemies (see v. 22). People and forces that devalue human life and attempt to thwart God's divine purpose in the world must be opposed by God's people. The psalm ends with a prayer that God will "search," "test," "see," and "lead" (vv. 23-24). Only through His continuing work in our lives can we learn to value all human life as He does.

► ACTS 16:16-19; PSALM 139:13-16

16:16 Once, as we were on our way to prayer, a slave girl met us who had a **spirit** **A** by which she predicted the future. She made a large profit for her owners by fortune-telling. **17** As she followed Paul and us she cried out, “These men, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation, are the **servants of the Most High God** **B**.” **18** She did this for many days. Paul was greatly annoyed. Turning to the spirit, he said, “I command you in **the name of Jesus Christ** **C** to come out of her!” And it came out right away. **19** When her **owners** **D** realized that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities.

139:13 It was you who **created my inward parts** **E**; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. **14** I will **praise you** **F** because I have been remarkably and wondrously made. Your works are wondrous, and I know this very well. **15** My bones were not hidden from you when I was made in secret, when I was formed in the depths of the earth. **16** Your eyes saw me when I was formless; all my days were written in your book and planned before a single one of them began.

Passage Outline

Freedom Gained
(Acts 16:16-18)

The Complaint
(Acts 16:19)

Valued by God
(Ps. 139:13-16)

Keywords

- A** Literally “python spirit,” which is rooted in the pagan myth of Apollos. It referred to an ability to predict the future.
- B** These men were slaves of God, not of people. Paul often referred to himself in this fashion (Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1).
- C** Jesus approved of healing in His name (Mark 9:38-41). He’s the One who healed through the apostles.
- D** The owners of the girl had dehumanized her, not caring about her or her healing from the evil spirit. They were concerned only about making money from their slave.
- E** God is the Creator of each person.
- F** God’s care in creating us leads to praise for Him and His ability to bring about life.

► EXPLORE THE TEXT

In the absence of a local synagogue, a group of women led by Lydia regularly met outside the city gates of Philippi to pray. Paul and Silas frequently joined them. One day while making their way to the prayer meeting, they encountered a fortune-telling slave girl. Much as Jesus had done, Paul commanded the spirit to leave the girl. Jesus' power is seen in the response of the spirit. The spirit didn't argue or fight but immediately left her.

How would you describe the difference between Paul's view of the slave girl and the owners' views of her? How would you define the motives of each man in the way he related to her?

The owners reacted as expected. All they could see was lost revenue. To them she was a business asset, not a person. Paul and Silas were taken to the city leaders and treated like criminals for freeing a slave girl from a demonic spirit.

How might someone justify the response of the owners? How do people use the same justification today for devaluing human life?

The owners of the slave girl were blind to her value. In contrast, the psalmist celebrated the wonder of humanity, emphasizing God's involvement in the creation of every person. God's intentional design gives every individual worth and value, beginning at the moment of conception.

The psalmist also claimed that God knew him, based on the formation of the human body. He pictured his body as the work of an embroiderer who skillfully creates an intricate, beautiful pattern. We can think of the intricate network of veins, sinews, muscles, and nerves that make up the body as a woven piece of art.

God observed the psalmist when he was an embryo in his mother's womb. We would be hard pressed to find a stronger statement affirming the sanctity and dignity of a child yet to be born. God values each of us, even when we were in an embryonic state. Focusing on his life before birth, the psalmist declared that God had a plan for him.

How do the words of the psalmist relate to the slave girl whom Paul freed from the demon? How does our understanding of both passages affect our treatment of all people from conception to death?

BIBLE SKILL: Read, reflect on, and emotionally react to a Bible verse. >> Read aloud Psalm 139:13-16 several times. Emphasize the pronouns used for God in the passage. Then read it aloud emphasizing the pronouns the writer used for himself (*I, me, my*, and so on). How does each verse move you emotionally? What feelings were evoked when you emphasized the pronouns the writer used for God and the pronouns the writer used for himself?

➤ APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers must take action as advocates for people who are devalued and marginalized.
- Society should be challenged to oppose businesses that profit from devaluing humans.
- Believers are to value all human life.

With your Bible-study group create a list of people or groups in your community who need an advocate. Propose ways your group could be that advocate. What role can you play in helping your group become an advocate for one of those people or groups?

Reflect on Psalm 139:14 at the end of each day for the next seven days. Ask God to show you anyone you devalued or marginalized during that day. Confess your attitude to God and ask Him to help you identify ways you can combat this tendency.



► DAILY EXPLORATION

Day 1: Believers must notice people around us who are being exploited.

Read Acts 16:16-17, recognizing the girl's enslavement.

Luke identified the fortune-telling slave girl as being controlled by a spirit of prediction. Greeks and Romans often consulted these fortune-tellers, and some people exploited them. The young slave girl in this passage generated enough revenue to support more than one owner. These owners viewed her as a commodity.

The slave girl followed Paul and the others as they made their way through the city toward the place of prayer, and she shouted as she followed them. The Gospels tell of incidents when demons made a scene by calling out Jesus' identity. For example, when Jesus approached a demon-possessed man in the Gerasenes region, the man identified Jesus as "Son of the Most High God" (Luke 8:28) and cried out for Jesus not to torment him.

The slave girl used the phrase "servants of the Most High God" (Acts 16:17) to identify Paul and his companions. Most High God was a common name used for God in the Old Testament. But in Philippi the name would have also been used for Zeus. To complicate matters, the girl also characterized Paul's message as showing the way to be saved. Because the Greek idea of salvation was physical deliverance from death, Paul's message of the gospel could have been distorted as the girl repeatedly cried out.

How did you experience spiritual bondage before coming to know God?

Day 2: Believers must take action to free people who are being exploited.

Read Acts 16:18, identifying Paul's swift command.

Luke explained that the fortune-teller's following and shouting wherever Paul and the other missionaries went lasted for many days. We can only imagine the distraction and confusion her actions caused. Some people may have begun to associate her with the group of missionaries. Something had to happen for Paul's team to witness effectively.

Much as Jesus had done, Paul commanded the spirit to leave the girl. Two details stand out in Paul's command. First, notice that he addressed the spirit, not the girl. Paul realized that the spirit was the problem, not the servant girl. Also notice that Paul acted in the name of Jesus. Bystanders would have clearly understood by whose power Paul commanded this spirit to leave. Jesus' power is seen in the response of the spirit. The spirit didn't argue or fight but immediately left the slave girl. She was now free to be herself again.

What modern-day situation compares to that of the slave girl? What opportunities for ministry are presented by this situation?

Day 3: Believers must expect a negative response when protecting people who are being exploited.

Read Acts 16:19, noting the slave owners' response.

The owners reacted as expected. All they could see was lost revenue. The word Luke used to describe the demon's departure ("come out," v. 18) is the same Greek word he used to describe the fact that their hope of making money was gone. We aren't told what happened to the girl. She isn't mentioned after the demon's departure. Her owners had no interest in her well-being; their only concern was the potential money lost.

Paul and Silas were taken to the city leaders, who were usually found in the marketplace. Luke pointed out that they were dragged there, treated like criminals for freeing a slave girl from a demonic spirit. Society usually tolerates Christians until their actions affect the economy. When that happens, Christian views are seen as a threat and are painted as a problem, regardless of the truth.

In what ways do people today use the same justification as these slave owners to devalue human life?

KEY DOCTRINE: The Christian and the social order >> In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism; every form of greed, selfishness, and vice; and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography.

Day 4: God carefully created every person.

Read Psalm 139:13-14, underlining verse 14.

God didn't stop creating after the sixth day, as recorded in Genesis 1. The psalmist realized that God's creative work continues to take place in a mother's womb. The psalmist didn't ignore the role of the parents but emphasized God's active involvement in the process. He saw God's work as wonderful, a testimony of God's power. He was astonished and amazed by God's handiwork that's seen in the human body. The psalmist didn't need charts and overlays of the body to recognize its complexity. He wasn't claiming to have full knowledge like God. Instead, the psalmist was emphasizing his firsthand knowledge of the wonders of God's handiwork. He needed no additional evidence; he recognized the care with which he had been created.


Why should you consider life valuable, based on the Bible?

Day 5: God continues to care for us throughout our entire lives.

Read Psalm 139:15-16, identifying the portion of our lifetimes God cares about.

God observed the psalmist when he was an embryo in his mother's womb. Focusing on his life before birth, the psalmist declared that God had a plan for him. The same word translated *planned* in verse 16 was used to describe the way God took dust and fashioned it into Adam (see Gen. 2:7). Some understand the psalmist to be talking about the development of the embryo, with the stages of that development being planned by God. Others understand the psalmist to be talking about God's providential care during our lifetimes. Both ideas are true and present in this psalm. Either way, our only response can be praise for God and His handiwork.

How does your understanding of this passage affect your treatment of all people from conception to death?



What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like.

SAINT AUGUSTINE

➤ OBEY THE TEXT

Reflect on the truths found in Acts 16 and Psalm 139 and record your responses to the following questions or discuss them with two other members of your Bible-study group.

How have you fought to free people from exploitation? How can you take additional steps to continue that fight?

What truths did God reveal to you in your study of Psalm 139 this week? Do you find yourself valuing a certain segment of a person's lifetime more than other portions?

MEMORIZE

I will praise you because I have been remarkably and wondrously made. Your works are wondrous, and I know this very well.

PSALM 139:14

MY THOUGHTS

Record insights and questions from this session's group experience and daily exploration.

MY RESPONSE

Note specific ways you'll put into practice the truth explored this week.

MY PRAYERS

List specific prayer needs and answers to remember this week.



➤ GETTING STARTED

OPENING OPTIONS: Choose one of the following to open the group discussion.

WEEKLY QUOTATION DISCUSSION STARTER: “What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like.”—Saint Augustine

- What’s your initial response to this week’s quotation?
- Why do you think people often struggle to love others with the degree of service, selflessness, and compassion detailed in today’s quotation?

In today’s passage we’ll see that the way Christ followers love and value people is supposed to stand in stark contrast to the way the world values people.

CREATIVE ACTIVITY: Before the group meets, think of a time when you saw bystanders intervene to help someone in need. Also think of a time when you witnessed someone in need, but no one stepped in to help. If you don’t have a personal story to share, search the Internet for stories of bystanders who saved others’ lives, as well as stories of bystanders who stood by and did nothing. Be careful to choose a story that’s appropriate for your group. When the group arrives, use the following questions and statements to open group discussion.

- What compels people to step in and help complete strangers?
- Conversely, what would cause someone to ignore the needs of someone in distress?
- One of the many problems of sin is that it distorts the way we view one another. Today we’ll see that sin causes people to view one another as a means to an end, whereas Christ calls us to love as He loves and to value others as He values them.

➤ UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PROVIDE BACKGROUND: Briefly introduce members to Acts, pointing out major themes, information, and ideas that will help them understand Acts 16:16-19 (see pp. 5 and 7). Then, to help people personally connect today’s context with the original context, use the following questions and statements.

- The Book of Acts records four of Paul’s missionary journeys. During each of these missionary journeys, Paul routinely ruffled people’s feathers with his teaching. In fact, his fourth missionary journey to Rome was as a prisoner after he had been arrested for preaching the gospel. Clearly, the apostle was less concerned with public opinion and more consumed by his desire to glorify God and serve others.
- As we’ll see in today’s passage, Paul’s mission to spread the gospel positively influenced people who were undervalued or exploited by the rest of society. On a global scale in what ways are you seeing gospel-driven efforts to reach marginalized and exploited people of the world? What about on a personal level in your own life?

- › We'll see in today's passage that every person has value in Christ's eyes, no matter their status or the way others treat them. Therefore, we too must value all people and, like Paul, serve everyone in the name of Christ.

› EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ THE BIBLE: Ask a volunteer to read Acts 16:16-19.

DISCUSS: Use the following questions to discuss group members' initial reactions to the text.

- › What immediately stands out to you in this text as a theme or primary point? What do you find encouraging, timely, or convicting?
- › In what ways do people today use the same justification as these slave owners to devalue human life?
- › How can this passage affect the way you view others, as well as the lengths you're willing to go to serve others?
- › In what ways was Paul's behavior reminiscent of Christ's? What behavior or attitudes in your life need to change so that, like Paul, you're more Christlike in your treatment of others?
- › What else does this text teach us about God? About ourselves? What other questions or observations do you have?

NOTE: Provide ample time for group members to share responses and questions about the text. Don't feel pressured to prioritize the printed agenda over group members' personal experiences. If time allows, discuss responses to the questions in the personal reading.

› OBEY THE TEXT

RESPOND: Foster an environment of openness and action. Help individuals apply biblical truth to specific areas of personal thought, attitude, and/or behavior.

- › When you think about people in the world who are undervalued and exploited, who comes to mind? What about in your own life?
- › What steps can you take to become more aware of undervalued and exploited people?
- › What subsequent steps can you take to serve and advocate for these people with Christlike love?

PRAY: Close by asking God to open your eyes to the needs of marginalized people. Thank Him for being faithful, for not forgetting you, and for not overlooking your great needs.