Viral: Good News Spreads Fast

## Acts 11-18

# *Discussion questions for each chapter*



# Introduction: Going Viral

Anything Harry and Megan do or say; the latest tweet from the POTUS; scandals in politics: we know such news goes “viral”. We must be mindful of the current pandemic and its associated pain and grief when using the title “Viral” for our new sermon series, but we know that good news also travels fast and reaches afar. In the 1st Century AD, Acts chapter 11 tells of how the Good News of Jesus went viral after Jewish Christians fled north from Jerusalem to the great multicultural city of Antioch in ancient Syria. People from many nations heard and responded to the Gospel with faith, and the rest, as they say, is history! The sermons in this series are available on the St Michaels North Carlton website and are an excellent resource for your group discussions, in video or audio or text format.

Take the time to read the whole story of Acts 11 through 18 and use the following discussion questions to consider how the Good News of Jesus might reach all people today.

1. Note in Acts 1:8 how the risen Jesus, prior to his ascension, met with his disciples in Jerusalem and set out the program to come: “… you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” What is the scope of God’s saving plans?
2. At a big celebration where Jewish people came from far and wide (Acts 2:5) to Jerusalem not long after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:9), the Spirit of God was poured out upon those who believed Peter’s great message about Christ. Read about that day passage in Acts 2:5-41.
3. Look at Acts 2:17-21 where Peter quotes the Prophet Joel. What might be considered revolutionary in the prophecy itself? What impact do you think its fulfilment through Christ might have potentially had on the normal lives of the people if it were to be realized?
4. Look at Acts 2:9-11 and have someone find a map that shows the extent of reach the Gospel potentially had when the travellers eventually returned to their homes.
5. Read Acts 9 to study the back story for the Apostle Paul. How would you describe his conversion?
6. Read Acts 10 to study God’s renewing of the mind of the Apostle Peter. Why could this be considered to be like “conversion” moment for Peter? What was at stake?

Share some stories around your group about where each person originates from, how they became Christians, or where and when they first heard the Good News about Jesus?

# Acts 11:19-26 – Gospel Ground Zero

Do some research (in the sermon or via Google) on the geography, history, and significance of Syrian Antioch in these times described in Acts 11.

1. Verse 21 tells how a great many Gentiles (non-Jews) became Christians in Syrian Antioch. Why might news of their apparent inclusion in all the same blessings granted to Jewish people who followed Christ have sounded so “interesting” to Jewish people in Jerusalem (v22)?
2. How did the history of “Greeks” and “Jews” prior to the 1st Century impact the distance between them (see Eph. 2:11-22)? How might this have affected how Jewish people interpreted who was included in “Old Testament” promises and who was not?
3. Jesus said, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” We see this exemplified in the early church. In…
   * The Evangelism carried out by the persecuted and fleeing believers,
   * The outward looking nature of the Church in Jerusalem,
   * The self-effacing leadership of Barnabas,
   * The sacrificial care of the young church towards its sending church.

Are there things we are holding on to so tightly that may be restricting our serving of God and what do we need to let go of? (e.g. Security, Identity, Home, Money, Job, Position, Respect, Plans, Relationships)

1. As a church and as individuals in it, where is our ministry at currently?
   * Are we sharing the good news of salvation through Jesus with others?
   * Are we consolidating and encouraging the growth of others?
   * Are we providing nurturing leadership?
   * Are we involved in the care of other believers?

# Acts 12:1-25 – Gospel v Government

1. John Stott says, “The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free and the word of God triumphing.” What might Luke be emphasising in his editorial role in writing the Book of Acts?
2. At the time of a big religious festival in Jerusalem, King Agrippa sought favour from Jewish people by publicly slaying a well-known Christian and imprisoning another with a view to do the same to him. How do you think you would you have reacted if you were a Christian watching on? How did the church react then (v5)?
3. How do you think Christians should react to evil governments today? How much should Christians cooperate with governments today? How much should Christians get involved in government? What’s the basis of your opinions?
4. The First Letter of Peter told persecuted Christians, “Submit… for the Lord’s sake, to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish people” (1 Peter 2:13-16). Likewise, the apostle Paul, writing under circumstances of a brutal government regime, wrote in Romans 13, “…submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” (Romans 13:1). How do you reconcile the idea of God as “sovereign” and the practical challenge of misused authority today?
5. Peter boldly stood up to authorities who sought to repress the spread of the Gospel against a despot like Emperor Nero - AD 54 to 68. In Acts 4 Peter (and John) said to authorities who wanted to shut down free speech about Jesus: “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to God? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard”. In Acts 5 Peter proclaims, “We must obey God rather than mortals.” Can you think of circumstance today that call for Christian civil disobedience of this nature?
6. Jesus called himself the bringer of justice, freedom, peace and hope to the poor and oppressed (e.g. Luke 4:18). His Gospel promoted radical change to values, ethics, and regard for human dignity. What politics of the Gospel might be controversial in our setting today?
7. Paul went on to teach that it breaks down the barriers created around race, gender, status, etc. (e.g. Gal. 3:28). Is the fact that the Gospel is more than a spiritual comfort to individuals, but a catalyst for personal, political, and societal transformation a positive motivation for sharing it with others today? Why? Why not?

# Acts 13:1-52 – Sending a clear message

1. Of all the teachers in Antioch, why do you think it was only Saul and Barnabas who were sent out as missionaries?
2. What is the significance of the setting in which the call to send them out comes?
3. Luke summarises their initial approach as "Proclaiming the word of God." What do you think this may have entailed?
4. Having seen how Paul demonstrates the power of God to Elymas and Sergius Paulus, think how might we demonstrate the power of God to someone today?
5. The account of Paul's speech in Pisidian Antioch expands on how he proclaimed the word of God. What are the significant elements to this proclamation? How might we do something similar today?
6. How might we connect God's story to the story of our friends or workmates today?

# Acts 14:1-28 – All in this together

1. Why was it Paul’s practice "as usual" to go into the Jewish Synagogue (v.1)?
2. What do you think Luke means by "so effectively"?
3. Were Paul and Barnabas too easily frightened into moving on to Lystra and Derbe (v6)? What you have done?
4. In verses 12 and 13 the people spoke excitedly in the local Lycaonian language that Paul and Barnabas don’t understand. Their speech and their identities were mistaken as if they were ancient gods. How does local culture, language and worldview impact our presentation of the Gospel today?
5. William Barclay suggests Paul “…started from the here and now to get to the there and then.” Paul and Barnabas identified themselves with the people, saying “We’re not gods”, says Paul. “Turn to the living God, who is not unfamiliar to you because he’s already been caring for you and providing you with all good things.” What starting points might we need to identify with in our sharing of the Gospel in our city today?
6. What was the result of the persecution of Paul and Barnabas (v8-13)?
7. How does Paul's explanation of the gospel in Lystra vary from the way he presented it in Pisidian Antioch (13:16-41)?
8. Why don't Paul and Barnabas go to the nearest port and sail straight back to Antioch (v.21)?
9. What was important about them calling the Church in Antioch together to report on what had happened to them (v.27)?
10. Why is encouraging and strengthening each other in faith essential to our wellbeing as followers of Christ and as human beings made in the image of God?

# Acts 15:1-35 – Dealing with Difference

1. What brings these men to Antioch?
2. Was this a serious issue for the Church?
3. Why does the Church send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem for a resolution to this disagreement?
4. Read Gal 2:11-16. Why did Peter draw back from fellowship with Gentiles?
5. In what way was this behaviour not in line with the truth of the gospel (Gal 2:14)?
6. What things might we or others impose today that would be similarly out of line with the gospel?

# Acts 15:36 – 16:5 – Coping with Conflict

1. What relationship did Barnabas and Paul have to this point (see Acts 13 and 14)? What was their shared attitude towards Gentiles becoming fully included in the life of the church (Acts 15:22-35)?
2. Gather all the intel you can find on Paul, Barnabas, John Mark, and the apostle Peter before going further.
3. What had John Mark done in Pamphylia that made Paul so reluctant to include him in the next journey?
4. What connection did John Mark have with Barnabas? What connection might John Mark have had with Peter? How might these two connections have caused Paul concern (see Gal. 2:11-14).
5. In what way was the breakup between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15 much more than a personality conflict?
6. At a personal, relational level, Paul’s example reminds us that we too might be put in situations where we may have to appeal to a friend to stay true to what the Gospel stands for. Standing up for the radical love Jesus offers might be costly for our relationships. How can we determine when to make a stand and when to compromise in our relationships? What governing principles might help you to navigate your way?

# Acts 16:13-40 – A new hospitality

1. How might Paul have discovered where to find the prayer meeting (v13)? How do you know where to find people who are seeking God in your city?
2. Lydia worshipped the God of Israel (a “God-fearer”). She was from Thyatira, a city in Asia, and a businesswoman in the trade of expensive textiles. What makes her so interesting to Luke as he writes this report on Paul’s missionary journey?
3. What is Paul, a Jewish rabbi of the 1st century doing talking with women (v16), non-Jews (v31), and even slaves (v18) in public – all considered “outsiders” ultimately by Jewish religious leaders? Who does he remind you of in the Gospels? What does this say about his own faith and theology (see Galatians 3:28)?
4. Remember Jesus’ instruction to the disciples Matthew 10:13? This was a radical shift in the practice of hospitality in the ancient world where a guest would always be on the lookout for a better offer from a more prestigious host. Lydia’s first response after hearing the gospel and being baptized was to offer hospitality in her own house (v15). What does this suggest about her faith?
5. The jailer was as good as dead if his prisoners escaped on his watch (v28). With his own welfare at stake, what do you make of Paul’s words and actions towards the jailer? What is it that can make us put others first in difficult circumstances?
6. What conditions did Paul put on the jailer that would make him a legitimate recipient of God’s grace and blessings in the Gospel? Why does Luke mention what happened next in verses 32-34?
7. How might the hospitality that flows from the Gospel in these examples challenge and shape the hospitality we offer to others today?

# Acts 17:1-15 – Open to Question

1. What was Paul's strategy for proclaiming the gospel in Thessalonica? What were the central elements of his proclamation?
2. What was the response of the people of Thessalonica?
3. In what sense had Paul and Silas been turning the world upside down (the Greek word points to a social revolution)?
4. Could Christians in our country suffer from the same accusation? If not, should we be doing something different? How does living in our era (post-Christendom) affect the impact of hearing or seeing the Gospel at work today?
5. What was the difference with the Jews in Berea? What was the result?
6. How might we encourage people to receive the message of the gospel with open ears and minds? What can we learn from Paul's approach?

# Acts 17:16-34 – Convincing Sceptics

1. Why was Paul so distressed when he walked in Athens? Paul’s feelings may reflect God’s own feelings (see Isaiah 44:6-11 and 65:3), and the Greek word for “distressed” (*paroxynomia* v16) points to deep emotional concern – what did these feelings motivate Paul to do?
2. How might Athens have been different from the other cities he'd visited?
3. What can we learn from the way Paul begins his presentation of the gospel?
4. Spend some time writing an outline of Paul's presentation in your own words suited to the people of your city who might be unfamiliar with the God of the Bible:

v24:

v26:

v27:

v29:

v30:

v31:

1. Is there anything you think Paul might have added had he had more time?
2. Why do you think we're so reticent to tell people about the “day” of judgment and justice to come that God has planned for the world? How can we re-frame this truth in our own understanding and in our sharing of the Gospel with others?

# Acts 18:1-17 – The Long Road Ahead

1. When Paul arrived at Corinth he sought out Aquila and Priscilla and began working with them at their trade. Why do you think he did this?
2. Paul faced opposition in almost every city he visited on his journey (especially from members of synagogues). Can you relate to his frustration and response in v6? What does the subsequent conversion of the man named Crispus (v8) and others imply about those who opposed him in the synagogue at Corinth?
3. Read 1 Cor 2:2-5. Why might Paul have been so apprehensive about preaching the gospel in Corinth. What was it that made him resolve to know nothing but “Christ and him crucified”?
4. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Thessalonica Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching the gospel (v5). What made the difference? You might like to read 1 Thess 3:6-10, Phil 4:14-16 and 2 Cor 11:8-9 for some clues.
5. Why do you think God chose this moment to speak to Paul in a vision? (v.9)
6. Why do you think Paul spent so much time in Corinth? (v.11)
7. How can you see God at work keeping his promise to protect Paul in the subsequent verses?
8. “To Corinthianize”, in Paul’s day, meant to recklessly seek personal sexual pleasure. How might Paul’s Gospel with its emphasis on freedom and grace have been interpreted by Gentiles in relation to hedonism, power, pleasure? (Look at the chapter headings in 1 Corinthians for clues).
9. What are some of the great challenging topics for making the Gospel known in your city today? How will you be strengthened and supported in the work of sharing the Good News in word and deed today?