

The Church Grows Strongly

July 27, 2025

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Acts 14:21-23; 16:4-5; 18:18-23

Session Outline

1. Strengthening the Disciples (Acts 18:18-23)
2. Strengthening through Encouragement (Acts 14:21-23)
3. Strengthening through God's Truth (Acts 16:4-5)

Theological Theme

In the book of Acts, we see Paul and his companions' efforts to strengthen the believers they encountered. The church doesn't just exist to tell others about Jesus, it also exists to strengthen the faith of its members.

Call to Action

In what ways does your discipleship need to be strengthened? Which of the Five G's do you need to lean into? Who can you ask to help you seek strength as a disciple? It's hard to be strengthened on your own. We need the church!



Leader Guide

The Church Grows Stronger

Introduction

In the fall of 1979, Lee Strobel got some stunning news: his wife Leslie, formerly an agnostic, had become a Christian. Lee himself was an atheist at that time.¹ An agnostic is more apathetic or uncertain, and an atheist believes there is no God or gods.²

Lee was worried. He thought Leslie might become a prudish stick-in-the-mud, hindering their carefree lifestyle. Instead, the opposite happened! He started seeing positive changes in her character and values. Even so, Lee, who thought the idea of God was absurd, wanted his old life and the old Leslie back. Lee was an award-winning editor at *The Chicago Tribune*, and he knew a thing or two about uncovering the truth. So, he did what he did best: launched an investigation.

Lee threw himself into investigating Christianity, reading books, interviewing experts, asking questions, exploring archeology, analyzing history, and studying ancient literature. He examined the Bible, verse by verse. He started his investigation fully believing that God wasn't real, and he ended it with a stunning realization: God is real. Lee emerged with a faith of a different kind, faith in Jesus. In 1981, after nearly two years of investigating and examining evidence about Jesus, Lee became a Christian.³

God strengthened Lee's faith by meeting him where he was—as an investigative journalist. After he became a Christian, Lee put the evidence he uncovered into a book, *The Case for Christ*. It has now sold over 5 million copies worldwide and has been adapted into Bible Studies and a movie.⁴

Today, God uses *The Case for Christ* to meet people where they are, just as He did with Lee, as they search and look to learn more or strengthen their faith.



What are some things or experiences that have strengthened your faith?



How does the connection of the church serve to strengthen our faith?

Session Summary

Acts records many details from Paul's ministry and missionary journeys, including the fact that Paul's work helped strengthen the believers he ministered to and discipled.

On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas did this in the towns of Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra by encouraging the believers there to continue in the faith and helping them understand that the hardships they were faced were necessary and normal for believers. On his second missionary journey, Paul and Timothy shared God's truth and guidelines for a life of faith. As a result, the believers' faith was strengthened, and their churches grew.

Today, we'll consider how we can strengthen our faith and the faith of those around us.

1. Strengthening the Disciples (Acts 18:18-23)



What does it mean that Paul was "strengthening all the disciples" (v. 23)?



What are some ways we seek to do this for other believers today?

The passage begins with Paul in Corinth (18:1), where he had been ministering at least a year and a half (18:11). This is where Paul met his partners in ministry, Priscilla and Aquila, a Jewish couple who had been expelled from Rome, along with all Jews living there (18:2). Just before today's passage, the Jews in Corinth dragged Paul in front of Gallio, proconsul of Achaia (18:12,14). But Gallio refused to engage or make a ruling on a religious matter.

After being brought before Gallio and the tribunal, Paul stayed on in Corinth "for some time" before sailing to Syria with Priscilla and Aquila (v. 18). We don't know the specifics, but Luke recorded that Paul took a vow that culminated in the shaving of his head at Cenchreae. It's possible that this was the Jewish Nazarite vow, which required the taker to leave his hair uncut for a certain period, but scholars aren't certain.

After leaving Corinth, Paul stopped in Ephesus, where Priscilla and Aquila stayed when Paul carried on. Ephesus, the capital and center of commerce for the province, was a bustling city of between 200,000 and 250,000 people.⁵ Home to a massive temple and bustling cult of Artemis, the city

Following the Lord's Will

Paul wasn't perfect, and we shouldn't think of him as such, but we do see that he conducted his life this way: He followed the will of the Lord rather than his own desires or preference. For example, in Acts 16:6 Luke recorded that Paul wanted to share the gospel in Asia, but the Holy Spirit prevented them from doing so, and they went to Macedonia instead.

was heavily steeped in Paganism. As was Paul's custom, Luke recorded that he debated with the Jews in the synagogue. Apparently, they were open to Paul's message of the gospel because they asked him to stay longer (v. 20). But Paul continued his journey, promising to return if God willed it. (Paul did return in Acts 19:1.)

After leaving Ephesus in Acts 18:21, Paul sailed from Ephesus to Caesarea, then headed on to Jerusalem where he "greeted the church" then continued to Antioch (v. 22). Luke's language of "up to" and "down to" in this verse was literal, as Jerusalem sits in the hills.

In verse 23, which marks the beginning of Paul's third missionary journey, we get to a key objective of Paul's ministry. After spending some time in Antioch, he left, traveling through place after place in the region, "strengthening all the disciples" (v. 23). When Luke said "disciples" here, he wasn't referring to the twelve men chosen by Jesus in the Gospels, but to all followers of Jesus, including us. Strengthening the faith of the disciples was a hallmark of Paul's ministry. He strengthened the disciples in several ways, both in person (traveling, sharing the gospel, and discipling the believers he encountered) and through his letters.



Application: What can we learn from Paul's example about strengthening the faith of those around us?

2. Strengthening through Encouragement (Acts 14:21-23)



How did Paul and Barnabas strengthen the disciples in this passage?



When was a time you were "strengthened" through encouragement?

Luke recorded Paul's first missionary journey starting in Acts 13. At the beginning of Acts 13, the Holy Spirit called for Paul and Barnabas to be set aside for kingdom work (13:2), and they were sent off into the mission field. During this journey, they visited Pisidian Antioch (13:13), Iconium (13:51), and Lystra (14:6).

The town Luke recorded in Acts 14:21 is Derbe. After preaching and making disciples there, Paul retraced his steps and headed back to the towns he had already visited. Luke recorded that believers were present in all these cities. Based on the treatment of Paul and Barnabas in those places, we can assume the believers there also faced opposition.

What did they do on this visit? They strengthened the believers. First, Paul and Barnabas encouraged them to “continue in the faith” (v. 22). They encouraged them to stick with it. This encouragement was probably needed and welcome to the people, who faced constant opposition. It would be tempting to compromise and make their lives easier and safer, but the gift of Jesus is worth any persecution we face.

Our lives look very different than the reality these first-century Christians were living, but we still get weary and tired, sometimes thinking it would be easier to quit following God’s call. Our role as brothers and sisters in Christ is to stand in the gap when we see that happening to others in our church and community. The Christian life is hard, and we should encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Second, Luke recorded that they shared this truth with them: “It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (v. 22). The enemy loves to make us feel like we are alone, isolated in our struggle, or like something is wrong with us specifically. But Paul and Barnabas knew the truth: struggles and trials are a normal and necessary part of this life.

Paul had just been stoned and was presumed dead (14:19). Paul and Barnabas had been persecuted and driven out of towns. They knew and thing or two about hardships, so their stories were surely an encouragement to these believers. When we openly share our struggles and the victories God has brought in our lives, we can strengthen the believers around us too.

Following this strengthening, they appointed leaders in their churches who would continue the work of discipleship and evangelism that Paul and Barnabas began.

- ❓ Application: What are some experiences from your life that, through sharing, might encourage believers in our church and community?

3. Strengthening through God’s Truth (Acts 16:4-5)

- ❓ What action did Paul and Timothy take in this passage? See chapter 15 for additional context.
- ❓ How would this serve to strengthen the churches they visited?

Paul and Barnabas continued traveling and eventually sailed back to Antioch, where they had first been commissioned for their missionary journey. (This is a different town than Pisidian Antioch, the town detailed in the section above.)

In Antioch, a dispute began over the issue of circumcision. Circumcision was required for Jews under Mosaic law, but was it required for newly converted followers of Jesus? Now that Gentiles were receiving salvation, many Christ followers were not circumcised like their Jewish counterparts. This was a big issue and major discussion in the early church. Paul and Barnabas were nominated to visit the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to ask for their opinion on the issue. This visit resulted in what we know as “The Jerusalem Council.”

At the council, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the apostles decided circumcision was not necessary. Peter said, “On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are” (15:11). Circumcision was not necessary, but they recommended abstaining from participating in things associated with idol worship. They wrote a letter and sent out missionaries to deliver their decision.

In Acts 16:4-5, we read about Paul and Timothy delivered this message to believers. This message informed how the people should live: They should not create extra burdens or roadblocks for Gentiles to come to know the Lord nor should they participate in activities associated with idol worship. They delivered truth of the gospel (we are saved by grace alone through faith alone), and the ways God wanted them to live. The idea of idolatry may look different today, but the heart behind this recommendation still applies: Are we participating in things that our culture says is okay, but the Bible and Holy Spirit do not?

As a result, the churches were strengthened in the faith. As the believers received the truth and lived it, the whole body of believers was strengthened. When we have our ears, eyes, and hearts open for God’s truth, and then live like He tells us, we, too, can be strengthened in the faith.

The other result? These strengthened churches were *growing*. God was adding to their numbers daily (v. 5). He often does the same thing in healthy, faithful churches today, too.



Application: How might we strengthen one another by speaking the truth? Who is God calling you to speak truth to today?

Conclusion

In Acts 18:23, Luke recorded a main objective and outcome of Paul's ministry, "strengthening all the disciples." Paul did this in many ways, both in person and through his letters, many of which we have in our Bibles today. (The Lord is still strengthening the faith of believers today through Paul's letters!) Today, believers still need to be strengthened. God wants to use our church to do this. Consider how can you be intentional about strengthening your faith and the faith of those around you.

- ❓ Where do you currently feel in need for renewed strength in your faith? How can you rely on Christ to use other believers in this process?
- ❓ How can our group seek to strengthen one another regularly and not only in moments of crisis and desperation?
- ❓ How does this pattern of seeking to strengthen one another in the Lord further encourage us toward gospel conversations with others?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for the ways He has strengthened the faith of those in your group. Ask that He would continue to strengthen your faith, and ask Him to show you how you can encourage and strengthen the faith of those around you.

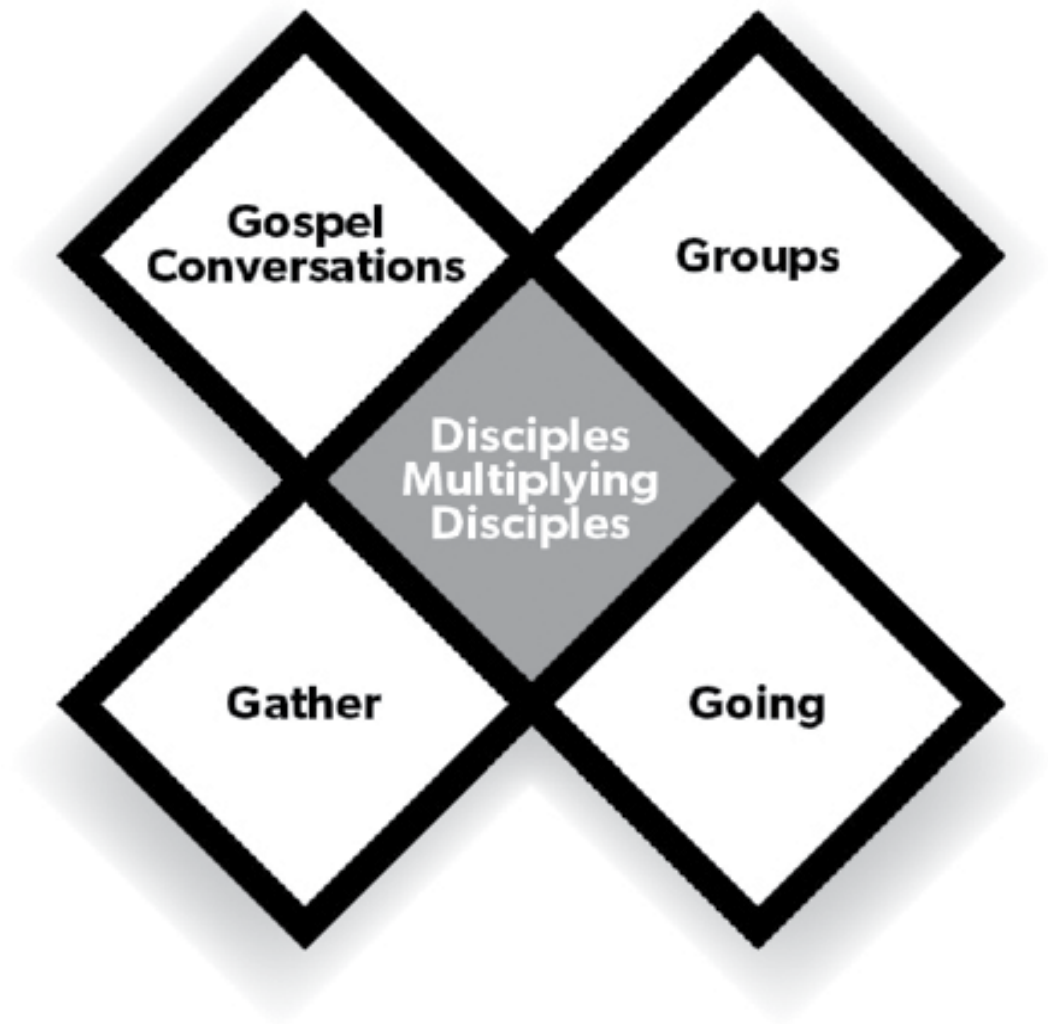
Memory Verse

After spending some time there, he set out, traveling through one place after another in the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. —Acts 18:23

Additional Resources

- *John—Acts* by Iain Duguid
- *Acts* by Charles Ryrie
- *Exalting Jesus in Acts* by Tony Merida

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Extended Commentary

Acts 14:21-23

14:21–22 After evangelizing Derbe (v. 20), Paul and Barnabas began their return journey to their home base of Antioch of Syria, stopping by each of the towns they had visited along the way (Lystra ... Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia). Their purpose was to strengthen the hearts of the disciples and be sure that they understood that many hardships come to those who seek the kingdom of God. Paul himself bore witness to this truth (2Co 11:23–27). Most of the churches Paul and Barnabas founded on this first missionary journey were in the Roman province of Galatia. These were probably the churches to which Paul addressed his letter to the Galatians.

14:23 Elders in these early Pauline churches were apparently appointed by Paul and Barnabas to establish the first stages of church leadership (see 11:30). These practiced official oversight and responsibility within the church (see 20:17).⁶

Acts 16:4-5

16:4 Besides evangelizing, Paul and his ministry partners conveyed the decisions of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about circumcision and Gentile converts (see 15:19). Paul wanted to make clear that Gentiles could believe in Jesus without adhering to Jewish rites.

16:5 No doubt one of the reasons the churches in this Gentile-dominated region were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers was that the Jerusalem Council had decided to minimize the burden imposed on Gentile believers (see 15:19,20).⁷

Acts 18:18-23

18:18 It is not clear that Paul was the one who shaved his head at Cenchreae. It may have been Aquila. The Greek syntax seems to indicate the latter, but it is uncertain. The vow may have been a Nazirite vow. If Paul was the person who made the vow, his going up to Jerusalem to visit “the church” (v. 22) may have included a stop at the temple to complete the vow and make an offering of his hair. Such activity was unusual for Paul, especially outside of Judea (cp. 21:26), but would have been consistent with his Jewish identity.

18:19–20 Paul’s stop at Ephesus must have been very short since he apparently did not encounter Apollos (vv. 24–28) or the misguided teaching that he countered in his later, extended visit to Ephesus (chap. 19).

18:21 Paul promised to come back to Ephesus if God wills, as indeed he did (19:1). Paul saw his ministry and his whole life as being in God’s service and control (see Rm 1:1).

18:22 We know it was the Jerusalem church that Paul greeted since he went down from there (Jerusalem is at a higher elevation) to Antioch. His arrival back in Antioch marks the completion of his second missionary journey.

18:23 This marks the beginning of Paul's third missionary journey. Like the first two, this one began from Antioch and retraced his steps through Asia Minor, particularly the Phrygian region of the province of Galatia.⁸

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