

ACTS: POWERED FOR PURPOSE

Week 8 • Series Finale Study Guide

Acts 20:16-24 | Why Called People Don't Finish Well

THE FULL ARC — EIGHT WEEKS IN ACTS

Luke built his narrative with deliberate theological architecture. Look at what we have traced together:

- **Weeks 1-2** Acts 1-2 — Power & Presence: the Spirit fills ordinary people; the Temple becomes mobile
- **Week 3** Acts 3-4 — Boldness: the Church carries God into the world; what I have I give you
- **Week 4** Acts 5-7 — Faithfulness: the price of power; Stephen finishes well
- **Week 5** Acts 9 — Sovereignty: the God who interrupts; new creation, not reformation
- **Week 6** Acts 12 — Deliverance: the new Exodus; James and Peter; God still delivers
- **Week 7** Acts 16 — Worship: singing before the victory; the prison becomes the sanctuary
- **Week 8** Acts 20 — Finishing: the one word that closes the series, and the three things that stop us

The series question answered: Acts was never just about what the early church did. It was the story of what the risen Christ continued doing through surrendered people. The same Spirit. The same mission. The same invitation — to ordinary people willing to be powered for purpose.

THE DEEPER THEOLOGICAL QUESTION

Acts 20 is a farewell address — one of the most personal moments in the entire book. Paul is not speaking to crowds or critics. He is speaking to church elders he has loved and labored with for years. And the word at the center of everything he says is not power or miracles or even faithfulness. It is finishing.

Luke has been building toward this moment all series. Every week we watched ordinary people empowered by an extraordinary Spirit. Now Luke asks the closing question: What stops people who start well from finishing well? His answer, through Paul's farewell, is not external opposition. It is internal unresolved things — the need for control, the wound that became a wall, and the comparison that quietly rewrote the calling.

There is also a deeper theological thread Luke is weaving. Paul's journey to Jerusalem — knowing suffering awaits, going anyway — deliberately echoes Jesus in Luke 9:51. Luke is not saying Paul is Jesus. He is showing what happens when someone follows Jesus long enough: their life begins to take the shape of the One they are following. That is the deepest work of the Spirit — not just power for ministry, but formation into Christ.

GOING DEEPER: PAUL'S LIFE TAKES THE SHAPE OF JESUS

One of the most overlooked theological moves in Acts 20 is the deliberate parallel Luke draws between Paul's journey to Jerusalem and Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in Luke 9:51. This is not coincidence — it is Luke's central thesis about Spirit-formed discipleship:

- Luke 9:51 — Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem / Acts 20:22 — I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem
- Jesus knew suffering awaited him — Paul knows suffering awaits him
- Jesus was handed over to Jewish and Roman authorities — Paul will be too

- Jesus went anyway — Paul goes anyway

The theological point: The goal of following Jesus is not simply to do things for Jesus. It is to become like Jesus. The Spirit's deepest work is not producing miracles through people — it is forming Christ in people.

The question Luke asks: We want God to answer 'Where are You taking me?' God is asking 'Who are you becoming?' We want information. God is interested in spiritual formation.

SCRIPTURE THREAD

Read these in sequence — trace the theology of finishing:

- Luke 9:51 — Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem — the pattern Paul follows
- Acts 20:16-24 — Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders
- Galatians 2:20 — It is no longer I who live — the identity that makes finishing possible
- Philippians 3:12-14 — Forgetting what is behind, I press on — Paul's race language
- 2 Timothy 4:6-8 — Paul near the end: I have finished the race — the fulfillment of Acts 20
- Hebrews 12:1-2 — Run with endurance, fixing our eyes on Jesus
- 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 — Run to win — intentional, disciplined, purposeful

The bookends:

Read Acts 20:24 and 2 Timothy 4:7 back to back. In Acts 20 Paul says he wants to finish his race. In 2 Timothy 4 he says he has finished it. The man who prayed the prayer in Acts 20 is the same man who fulfilled it decades later. That is what a finished life looks like.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Paul says he does not know what awaits him — and goes anyway. Where in your life are you waiting for certainty when God has already given you enough clarity to obey? What is the real difference between wisdom and control?
- What feels like a changed season is sometimes self-protection. Has pain ever quietly made a ministry or relational decision for you — one you later dressed in spiritual language? How do you discern the difference between God releasing you and fear stopping you?
- Paul says his assignment was received — not invented. Where have you been running someone else's race? What specific thing has Jesus actually assigned to you that you may have set aside because it felt too small, too slow, or too invisible?
- When identity needs validation, comparison will constantly rewrite your calling. What is the deepest source of your sense of significance right now — your assignment, your results, or the One who assigned it?
- Eight weeks in Acts. What is the one thing God showed you in this series that you cannot go back from? What does faithful obedience look like for you in the next 30 days?

THE THREE REASONS — A DIAGNOSTIC FOR YOUR RACE

Paul's farewell in Acts 20 surfaces three internal reasons why called people don't finish well. These are not external circumstances — they are interior conditions that masquerade as spiritual wisdom:

1. The Need for Clarity (Control): Paul has direction without details — I don't know what awaits me. When we say we are waiting for clarity, we are sometimes saying we are not willing to obey until we can control the outcome. God gives enough clarity for obedience, rarely enough for control. The next step is usually clearer than we admit.

2. Self-Protection (Unhealed Pain): Most people don't quit their calling in one dramatic moment. They get hurt. They fail. They are criticized. Something inside learns: don't let that happen again. We give the retreat spiritual language — my season changed, I lost peace — but underneath it, pain has become the decision-maker. Be careful that your pain does not become your savior.

3. Self-Ambition (Comparison): We see someone else's platform, influence, or results — and what God gave us suddenly feels insufficient. Comparison rewrites our calling because our identity still needs external validation. Paul's freedom comes from one conviction: if Jesus assigned it, its significance was settled before anyone noticed it.

The diagnostic question: Did God release me from this — or did getting hurt make me afraid to keep going? Those are not always the same thing.

RESOURCES FOR DEEPER STUDY

BOOKS

- *Finishing Strong* — Steve Farrar | The definitive Christian book on why people who start well often don't finish — directly addresses every theme in Acts 20.
- *The Call* — Os Guinness | The most theologically rich treatment of calling available — unpacks what it means to receive an assignment from God rather than invent one.
- *Running on Empty* — Fil Anderson | Pastoral treatment of the self-protection trap — what happens when we protect ourselves out of our calling.
- *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary (Vol. 4)* — Craig Keener | Scholarly treatment of Acts 20 and Paul's Miletus address, including its connections to Luke 9:51.
- *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* — John Mark Comer | Addresses the formation question at the heart of Acts 20 — who are you becoming? — and the practices that sustain a long obedience.

PODCASTS & SERMONS

- *Acts 20* — The Bible Project podcast | Excellent treatment of Paul's farewell address and its place in Luke's larger narrative architecture.
- *Finishing Well* — John Bevere (messengerinternational.org) | AG-aligned treatment of the spiritual disciplines required to finish a God-assigned race.
- *Don't Quit* — Craig Groeschel / Life.Church (open.life.church) | Addresses the self-protection and comparison traps that quietly derail callings.
- *Your Calling Is Received, Not Invented* — Louie Giglio (YouTube) | Directly addresses the *lambano* (received) understanding of calling that Paul models in Acts 20.
- *Run Your Race* — Tony Evans (tonyevans.org) | Theologically grounded treatment of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 alongside the finishing language of Acts 20.

ARTICLES & ONLINE RESOURCES

- *What Is Christian Calling?* — Assemblies of God Enrichment Journal (ag.org) | AG-grounded theological framework for understanding calling as received, not self-constructed.
- *Paul's Farewell Address at Miletus* — Bible Study Tools (biblestudytools.com) | Exegetical overview of Acts 20:16-38 and its significance as Paul's most personal speech.
- *Why Do So Many Christian Leaders Fail to Finish Well?* — The Gospel Coalition (thegospelcoalition.org) | Research-based treatment of the patterns that lead to unfinished callings.
- *Galatians 2:20 and the Crucified Life* — Crosswalk.com | Devotional treatment of the identity that makes finishing possible: It is no longer I who live.

SERIES CLOSING CHALLENGE — YOUR RESPONSE TO EIGHT WEEKS IN ACTS

Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome — still preaching, still making disciples, still

advancing the gospel. Luke's final two words in the Greek are: unhindered and boldly. The story does not end. It continues — through you.

- Read Acts 20:16-24, then 2 Timothy 4:6-8. Let the man who wanted to finish his race speak to you as the man who finished it. What does that completed life say to you today?
- Write down the one assignment God has given YOU — not someone else's, not the one you wish He had given you. Be specific. Then write what faithful obedience to that assignment looks like in the next 30 days.
- Identify which of the three reasons resonates most with you: control, self-protection, or comparison. Bring it honestly before God. Ask Him to reveal what is underneath it.
- Memorize Acts 20:24. Let that verse be your declaration as this series closes and a new season begins.

The series question one final time: *What would happen if we truly lived the way they lived? What would happen in our homes, our families, our city, our church — if Christianity became more than something we believe and became something we actually experience?*

I am not responsible for finishing all of God's mission. I am responsible for faithfully finishing my part in it.