

DANGEROUS FAITH



A DISCUSSION
GUIDE ON THE
BOOK OF ACTS



Open Doors



Once, when visiting Indonesia with Brother Andrew, a group of Christian leaders came to meet us from a big city in Java. They were full of excitement.

**“Oh, Andrew,” they said.
“We are living in the book of Acts. We’ve seen growth, angels, healings, miracles, amazing conversions.**

**“Come,” they said.
“Walk onto the pages of the book of Acts.”**

**Andrew just said,
“Oh, the book of Acts is it? Then, take me to see your persecution.”**

**“Persecution?” they said.
“We don’t have any. We are doing so much good here. Everyone loves us.”**

Andrew shook his head.

“Then, you can’t be living in the Book of Acts,” he replied.

THE DANGEROUS FAITH OF THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

What would you do if your faith
put you in danger?

For millions of Christians around the world, following Jesus is a highly dangerous activity. At the very least it means facing abuse and discrimination. For many, their choice might result in losing their job or their home. Millions have to keep their faith hidden, because following Jesus puts them outside the law.

For many – far too many – following Jesus means arrest, imprisonment or even death.

Christianity is a dangerous faith.

It's not hard to see why.

Following Jesus sets people free. And to those in

power – the dictators and religious leaders, the violent extremists, the rubber-stamping bureaucrats – freedom is a toxic substance. So they will do everything in their power to crush it, to smash it, to shut it down.

Never works, though. Never has.

Because, despite the danger, Christians in these countries are still sharing the good news.

In North Korean labour camps and Iranian prison blocks, in secret Chinese house churches and in the burned-out shells of buildings in Nigeria, Christ is building His church.



About Open Doors

Open Doors exists to strengthen and support persecuted Christians, wherever they are and for as long as they need help.

For over 60 years, Open Doors has stood alongside Christians whose faith puts them in danger. Our global, underground networks always work in partnership with the local church - wherever it is found and whatever the danger. Through the gifts and prayers of Open Doors supporters, millions of Christians around the world

receive food and medicine, spiritual care, training and legal advice. They get their hands on smuggled Bibles and literature. Homes are rebuilt, lives are rescued, churches are restored.

It's long-term work. But that's the task, the journey, the joy: to stand with Christians whose faith puts them in danger. To help them and to learn from them. To pray with them, support them, speak up for them. Wherever they are. For as long as they need it.

www.opendoorsuk.org

DANGEROUS FAITH: ACTS

The book of Acts tells the exciting story of the first three decades of the early church. Beginning with the ascension of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the book takes us through a roller-coaster ride of wondrous healings, explosive church growth and miraculous conversions.

But along with all this good news, there's a darker undercurrent to the book. There is violence and opposition and death. Apostles are flogged, Stephen gets stoned to death, Saul the hunter becomes Paul the hunted, Peter is thrown into jail, James is beheaded. And the book ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome.

The reaction of the authorities – the arrests, beatings, banishments and executions – all happened because the faith being proclaimed by the first followers of Jesus was dangerous.

And here's the thing: without this persecution, the gospel would never have spread in the way it did. It is precisely because of the persecution, because of the pains and the chains and the floggings and the martyrdoms, that the gospel spreads to the ends of the earth.

And today the same thing is happening around the world. Today, Christians are being persecuted and attacked, and still the kingdom of God is growing.

This series of videos explores the dangerous faith of the first century church and that of persecuted Christians today. It's a journey which will take us not only through the Roman world, but also to China, Colombia, Iraq, the Philippines and Pakistan, where persecution today is revealing remarkable truths about the strength, depth and greatness of God's love.

ABOUT THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

This discussion guide will help you to use the Dangerous Faith series for small groups or personal study.

Each meeting follows the same pattern.

1. **Watch** the video
2. **Read** the Bible passage
3. **Explore** the Bible passage using the discussion questions
4. **Pray** for the persecuted church and for yourselves

Accompanying each session is a brief introduction to the video and some contextual information to help you with the Bible passage.

Of course, these are only suggestions. You are free to follow your own pattern and we are sure that you will come up with your own questions!

INTRODUCING DANGEROUS FAITH

There are two introductory videos that explain a bit more about the series, which you might find helpful.

Introduction to Dangerous Faith

What would the Bible look like if we 'cut out' all the verses concerning persecution?
"We need the persecuted to put our Bible back together again."

Introduction to the Book of Acts

What does the story of the early church look like viewed through the lens of persecution?
"God spreads the gospel through the earth through the pains and the chains of persecution. Persecution is the motor of the gospel."

To order more copies of this discussion guide and to watch or download the films accompanying Dangerous Faith, go to www.opendoorsuk.org/dangerousfaith

ABOUT THE PRESENTERS



Dr Ronald Boyd-MacMillan is the Director of Research and Strategy for Open Doors International and a professor of Practical Theology in Lahore, Pakistan. He has 30 years of travel among persecuted Christians on five continents and is the author of *Faith that Endures: The Essential Guide to the Persecuted Church*.



Nick Page is an historian, speaker and the author of more than 80 books for adults and children. His books on biblical history include *The Longest Week, The Wrong Messiah, The One-Stop Bible Atlas, Revelation Road* and *Kingdom of Fools* – a history of the early church.

1 DANGEROUS FAITH

'And his door was always open'

Introduction

We're starting off this walk through Acts in an unexpected place: the end!

The Acts of the Apostles is, perhaps, the Bible's most dramatic book. It's full of startling events: flames of fire at Pentecost, the creation of the church, miracles, persecution, martyrdoms, healing, the conversion of the Gentiles, death-defying journeys, imprisonment, beatings, arguments... it's all there.

One of the keys to understanding this book is the geography. Acts takes us through the ancient Roman Empire, focusing especially on four key locations: Jerusalem, Samaria, Antioch and Rome.

And it is in Rome that we begin. Paul is

in the city because, after being arrested in Jerusalem, he decides to take his case to Rome to have it heard in front of the world's most powerful man – Caesar.

Yet we don't get to see this final scene where the world's most amazing missionary meets the world's most powerful man, on behalf of the world's true God.

Instead, Paul is a prisoner for the last eight chapters. And he takes years to travel to Rome.

So where's the climax?

Why is this the ending?

WATCH

Dangerous Faith

Part 1: 'And his door was always open'

READ

Acts 28:23–31

A LITTLE BIT OF BACKGROUND

Time: AD 60

Place: Rome

- Paul is under house arrest. He is not in prison, but instead in lodgings, where he would have been assigned a guard. In the ancient world, prisoners had to pay for their own food and drink, and here Paul has to do the same.
- Christianity first came to Rome some 20 years before Paul's arrival: we know there was an established Christian presence there by AD 49. The city also had around 40,000 Jewish residents.
- Rome was by far the biggest city in the empire – with perhaps as many as one million inhabitants. Only the wealthy lived in *domus* – private houses. Most people lived in tenement buildings, known as *insulae*, or slept rough on the streets.

EXPLORE

- Have you ever felt as though you were drifting? Have you ever wondered: has God still got the same use for me?
- Verse 31 talks of Paul 'proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness...' If you had knocked on Paul's door and sat down with him, what kinds of things do you think he would have told you about Jesus and His kingdom?
- "It's not about us, it's about what the Holy Spirit does through us." In the video, Ron calls this 'a comforting truth'. Do you find comfort in it? If so, why?
- Where has the Holy Spirit placed you right now? Do you feel trapped? Do you feel as if you're not doing what you were born to do? Where you are for God is just as important as what you do for God. How might the Holy Spirit be getting the gospel out through you, right where you are?

PRAY

Many persecuted Christians around the world are trapped – some, indeed, literally in prisons or labour camps. But that doesn't mean that they cannot serve Christ where they are.

- In North Korea, there are tens of thousands of Christians in labour camps.
- In Eritrea, Christians are rounded up and incarcerated – often in metal shipping containers in the desert.
- In Iran, house churches are raided and pastors sent to prison.

Yet in all these places, Christians find ways to worship God, to witness to others and to demonstrate the love of Jesus.

For the persecuted church

- Pray for Christians around the world who feel trapped or confined by their government or society. Ask the Lord to show His power through them.
- Pray especially for those who are literally trapped – in prison or labour camps.

For yourselves

Holy Spirit, please work through us, wherever we are and whatever we are doing. Even at times in our lives where we feel 'trapped' or 'confined', we ask for the faith to believe that You are still active and that You still have a purpose for our lives.

2 DANGEROUS FAITH

'And a cloud hid Him from their sight'

Introduction

At the beginning of the book of Acts, Jesus gives the disciples the incredibly challenging task of taking the gospel to the ends of the world. Then He just disappears. Into thin air. And yet, this is not desertion. It's design. It's Jesus' way of saying, "Now you do the impossible things I did."

In this video we meet 'Auntie Mabel', a Christian lady in China who went through decades of persecution when it felt to her as though she was completely alone. And yet she came to see God's purpose in it all.

WATCH

Dangerous Faith
Part 2: 'And a cloud hid Him from their sight'

READ

Acts 1:1–11

A LITTLE BIT OF BACKGROUND

Time: AD 33

Place: Jerusalem

- In the 40 days after His Resurrection, Jesus appeared many times to His disciples – not only to the 11 apostles, but also to members of His family and to many different followers. (Paul gives a list in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8.)
- This event takes place on the Mount of Olives, to the east of Jerusalem.
- Luke gives another, briefer, account of the Ascension, at the end of his gospel - his 'first book' as he calls it in Acts 1:1-2.

EXPLORE

- Victimised, beaten, abused and alone, Mabel cried out: "Lord, why must You be so invisible?" Have you ever felt abandoned by God?
- In Acts 1:3 it says that Jesus presented Himself alive to the apostles 'by many convincing proofs'. Can you list some of the Resurrection appearances? How did they prove Jesus had returned from the dead?
- In the video, Ron says that Jesus ascends to give us the space to do His work in our way, and so even our failures, our doubts, our struggles, become the

means of God taking His power through us to all around us. How do you think our failures, doubts and struggles show God's power?

- Mabel wanted the Lord to appear in a physical form, but He never did. She believed that it was not desertion, but generosity: "Because it seemed like he disappeared, He was really giving me the space to do the impossible... through His power to endure." How do you respond to that? Are you in a place where the Lord is giving you the space to do something which seems impossible?

PRAY

Many persecuted Christians around the world face overwhelming difficulties.

- In the Maldives, being Maldivian is equated with being a Muslim; anyone who chooses to leave Islam is likely to lose their Maldivian citizenship.
- In Yemen, indigenous believers must keep their faith a complete secret - it is seen as a huge source of shame for a family member to leave Islam, so believers from Muslim backgrounds run the risk of honour killing or physical violence if their families or communities discover their faith.
- In Somalia, just the suspicion that someone is a Christian can lead to immediate execution. Yet in all these places, Christians find ways to worship God, to witness to others and to demonstrate the love of Jesus.

Yet in all these places, there are secret, undercover Christians who are finding that the Holy Spirit is giving them the power to patiently endure.

For the persecuted church

- Pray for Christians around the world who feel trapped or confined by their government or society. Ask the Lord to show His power through them.
- Pray especially for those who are literally trapped – in prison or labour camps.

For yourselves

Lord God, here and now we give You the space to do the impossible in our lives. We remember Your resurrection came only after days in which it seemed as though You had gone for good. Use our failures, and even our doubts, to reveal Your presence and power.

3 DANGEROUS FAITH

'God's temple is not built with human hands'

Introduction

In chapter 7 of Acts, the first Christian is martyred. Stephen, a Greek-speaking Jew living in Jerusalem is stoned to death. He was killed because he had a very dangerous idea: "God's temple is not built with human hands."

In this video we learn that God cannot

be kept in a box. If you want your God to be safe, predictable and manageable, then build a temple for Him. But if you want God to be who He is – dangerous, just, sovereign, accepting – then better dismantle your box and live!

WATCH

Dangerous Faith

Part 3: 'God's temple is not built with human hands'

READ

Acts 6:8–15; 7:44–8:1

A LITTLE BIT OF BACKGROUND

- Stephen is one of the seven 'deacons' – a word that means servant. He and the others were appointed to liaise with the growing number of Christians among the Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem.
- Stephen is a 'Hellenist' – a Jew from a Greek background. (Paul was another Hellenist). Many of these were immigrants in Jerusalem, having relocated there from elsewhere in the Roman Empire. In the passage, we hear of Jews from Cyrenia (modern-day Libya), Alexandria (in modern-day Egypt), Cilicia (modern-day Turkey) and Asia (modern-day west and southern Turkey).
- The fact that they were largely an immigrant community meant that they were an easy target for persecution, and might explain why the Apostles – who were all native Aramaic-speaking Jews – were not expelled from the city later on.
- Stephen goes to the Synagogue of the Freedmen – a synagogue which was largely made up of ex-slaves who had been freed by their masters or who had bought their freedom in some other way.

EXPLORE

- How do we 'build a temple with our own hands'?
- Imagine that you are an orthodox, pious worshipper who is visiting the Temple, you hear what Stephen says and see what happens to him. How do you respond? Are you angry? Upset? Confused?
- Read Acts 6:13–14. What exactly is Stephen being accused of?
- Stephen's speech lists many places outside the Temple – and, indeed, Israel – where people encountered God in a powerful way. Have you ever encountered God in an unusual, or even an 'impure' place?
- What are the ways in which we seek to keep God under control? Is it through tradition? A building? A doctrine?

PRAY

All around the world, governments believe that they can control Christianity. They think that they can restrict it, monitor it, keep it locked up in a box.

- In Uzbekistan the government closely monitors religious groups. Christians in unregistered churches suffer from police raids, threats, arrests and fines.
- In Algeria, churches have to agree to the government's rules. These rules ensure that churches cannot hold Bible studies, host foreign preachers or even run a Sunday school and so very few churches agree to them.
- In Laos, house churches are considered 'illegal gatherings' and must operate in secret.

Yet in all these places, Christians find ways to share the good news.

For the persecuted church

- Pray for Christians who are restricted in talking about their faith.
- Pray that they will find the ways to talk about Jesus, and that the good news of Jesus will escape all the restrictions.

For yourselves

Holy Spirit, we cannot contain You or tame You or put You in a box - You can surprise us with Your wildness and unpredictability. Help us to look beyond the safe boundaries of our buildings and traditions, to hear Your call and share the good news with those who need to hear it.

4

DANGEROUS FAITH 'It takes a smashing'

Introduction

When everything goes wrong, when the enemies triumph, when all the weaknesses surface, when cancer strikes, when the government tightens up the law, when the bribed judge gets away with it, when the killer walks free, is that it for the kingdom?

Or could it be that the painful experiences which Christ's followers often go through are the very thing that will spread God's good news in a new way?

WATCH

Dangerous Faith
Part 3: 'It takes a smashing'

READ

Acts 8:1–8; 12–13

A LITTLE BIT OF BACKGROUND

- This passage probably takes place sometime in the mid-30s AD.
- The persecution following Stephen's death concentrated on Stephen's fellow Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenists).
- The 'Philip' here is not the Apostle, but Philip the deacon, who was one of the seven appointed to help the Apostles (Acts 6:5). Later, he settles in Caesarea where some 25 years later he offered hospitality to Paul (Acts 2:8).
- Samaria was a region to the north of Jerusalem and Judea, between Judea and Galilee. The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. Jews viewed Samaritans as impure and unclean. This makes Philip's preaching even more remarkable.

EXPLORE

- What would go through Philip's mind as he fled Jerusalem? How would he feel?
- 'Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word.' (Acts 8:4). Why were these fleeing followers willing to share the gospel that had got them into so much trouble in Jerusalem? (See Acts 1:8; 2:32, 4:19–20)

- In the video, Ron claims that persecution does two things: it pushes power down to people who have never had it before, and pushes people outward to places they have never been before. Why do you think this is? Have you seen this happen?
- Have you experienced a time of loss or smashing? Could you see God at work in that?

PRAY

Many persecuted Christians around the world are experiencing a 'smashing'; their churches are burned, their communities overrun, their leaders killed or arrested.

- In Nigeria, Islamic extremists have destroyed churches, attacked Christian communities and kidnapped Christians.
- In Egypt, the level of violence against Christians remains extremely high. Church leaders have been attacked and killed, and church buildings attacked by suicide bombers.
- In India, Christians face horrific levels of violence from extremists, with thousands of attacks taking place every year. Many Christians have been beaten by mobs and driven out of their villages.

Yet in all these places, people are encountering the presence of God wherever they are: in refugee camps, in makeshift churches, in temporary accommodation.

For the persecuted church

- Pray for all Christians who face violence and terror.
- Pray for those who have lost home and possessions, whose loved ones have been kidnapped or killed.
- Pray that they will experience the presence of God in powerful ways.

For yourselves

Lord, help us to share the power we have with those who feel powerless. Help us take Your Word to new places and people. We pray for all those who feel smashed: that they will see You at work in their lives.



When Rohan started a church in his village, opponents burned it down. "I never thought about giving up," he says. "I trusted that God would act."

Open Doors partners in India helped him rebuild the church, and the congregation has doubled to 60 families.

5 DANGEROUS FAITH

'The believers lowered him in a basket'

Introduction

In the pitch black, a man is lowered out of a window in a four-foot wide laundry basket. As it reaches the ground, out leaps a balding man in his thirties. He scampers away into the darkness of the Arabian desert. The Apostle Paul never expected to make an exit like this in his life. He had come to Damascus

to conduct religious cleansing. Now he was the one being cleansed. No longer an ambassador. A fugitive.

One thing, at least, must have become clear to Paul as he sat there in the basket: the Christian life involves being pursued!

WATCH

Dangerous Faith

Part 5: 'They lowered him in a basket'

READ

Acts 9:1–25

A LITTLE BIT OF BACKGROUND

- Damascus is one of the oldest cities in the world. It lies some 135 miles (217 km) northeast of Jerusalem and would have taken Paul around six days to make the journey by foot.
- Acts 9:2 is the first time in the book that Christians are described as belonging to the Way. This is probably the oldest name for what became known as Christianity. (See also Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.)
- The road where Ananias lived – 'Straight Street' – can still be found today in the eastern part of the old city. In Paul's day, it was a mile long and lined with columns.
- According to Paul's own words in Galatians, he spent some time in 'Arabia' after his conversion (Galatians 1:17). 'Arabia' in this context does it mean the Arabian Peninsula, but Syrian Arabia, or the Nabatean Kingdom, just northeast of the Dead Sea. So Luke's account probably compresses a couple of years between verses 22 and 23 of Acts 9.
- Paul gives another account of his 'escape' story in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33.

EXPLORE

- Put yourself in the place of Paul, being lowered in the basket. How do you think he felt?
- Read Acts 9:3-6. What is Jesus' accusation against Paul? Why does Jesus say, 'You are persecuting me', when Paul is attacking His followers?
- "In the persecuted church, Christians realise they are in trouble, and go to God about it. In the Western church, Christians forget they are in trouble, or in a fight, and even if they do remember, never manage to find the time to go to God about it." Do you agree?
- Remember, Jesus said "love your enemies". He didn't say, "don't make any". Does your faith make enemies?

PRAY

Many persecuted Christians around the world are hunted because of their faith.

- In Pakistan, the nation's infamous blasphemy laws continue to be abused to settle personal scores, particularly against minorities, including Christians.
- In Afghanistan, if someone is suspected of converting to Christianity, they will be arrested.
- In Libya, dozens of Christians have been kidnapped or killed by extremists.

Yet in all these places, Christians continue to witness, despite the personal danger.

For the persecuted church

- Pray for safety and protection for Christians in places where it is dangerous to express their faith.
- Pray for wisdom and discernment in knowing when to share and with whom.
- Pray for Christians who have to flee – that they will be comforted and encouraged.

For yourselves

Lord, give us courage to speak about our faith, even when it might be difficult or unpleasant. Spirit, prompt us to turn to You when we feel in trouble or distress.



DANGEROUS FAITH

'They were called Christian'

Introduction

Today, the cross is one of the most famous symbols in the world. But the early church didn't use the symbol very much. They talked about the cross, of course, about its life and death message, but for them the cross was an instrument of torture and execution. They didn't depict it in their art.

In fact, the first known depiction of

Jesus on the cross is a mocking, childish cartoon scratched on the wall of a room in Rome.

This should come as no surprise: Jesus warned His followers that they would be mocked, insulted and called names. In fact, that's where the name Christian comes from...

WATCH

Dangerous Faith
Part 6: 'They were called Christian'

READ

Acts 11:19–26

A LITTLE BIT OF BACKGROUND

- This passage begins with a 'flashback' to the persecution which broke out in the mid-30s AD after Stephen's death. Then we move forward a few years to the early 40s, when Barnabas goes to Antioch and recruits Saul.
- Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It was a cosmopolitan place.

EXPLORE

- Imagine you are a citizen of Antioch who hears about this new group of Jesus-followers. Or that you are a fellow school pupil of Alexamenos in Rome. Why might you choose to mock these 'Christians'?
- Describe Barnabas' relationship with Paul. (Check out Acts 4:36; 9:26–28; 15:36–41; Galatians 2:11–14.) Why do you think Barnabas recruited Saul? What qualities might Saul have had that would have helped with this young church?
- We should expect to be mocked and looked down on. That's what people do when their worldview is threatened. Have you been mocked for your beliefs? How did you feel? And how did you respond?

- In the video, Nick says that we can give people the tools to defend themselves against abuse and persecution. What kind of tools would be useful and appropriate?

PRAY

Many persecuted Christians around the world are mocked or looked down on because of their faith. In some places, Christianity is associated with people from a low caste.

- In Malaysia, Christians often come from minority groups and face discrimination in both their private and business lives.
- In Pakistan, Christian children are often bullied at school and sometimes even banned from using the same water fountain as other students because they will 'defile' the water source.
- In Turkey, Christians from ethnic minorities such as Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Syriac Christians experience discrimination in the workplace, especially where employers have ties to the government.

Yet in all these places, Christians are being helped to increase their status and their lives through literacy programmes, vocational courses and other training.

For the persecuted church

- Pray for your brothers and sisters in Christ that they will bear ridicule and insults with patience.
- Pray that the grace of God will flow through them.
- Pray that they will find ways to gain independence and that they would see themselves as beloved children of God.

For yourselves

Lord, help us not to be afraid to stand out from the crowd and to be ready to give an explanation for our faith with love and kindness. Help us show the values of Your kingdom, not those of the world around us.

7

DANGEROUS FAITH

'They were tentmakers'

Introduction

The Apostle Paul. That's how we think of him. His name was Paul, and his job was an 'apostle'. But Acts gives a broader picture. He had a trade: he was a tentmaker. It was this job that gave

him the freedom to travel the ancient world, taking the gospel. When you have a dangerous faith, you have to be prepared to live on the move.

WATCH

Dangerous Faith
Part 7: 'They were tentmakers'

READ

Acts 18:1-17

A LITTLE BIT OF BACKGROUND

Time: Paul arrived in Corinth around AD 50-51. He remained there for 18 months.

- Priscilla and Aquila were themselves victims of persecution: they had been thrown out of Rome in AD 49.
- In the ancient world, tentmakers worked with a range of materials: not just canvas, but leather as well. It was hard work. Paul talks of himself as poorly clothed and 'weary from the work of our own hands' (1 Corinthians 4:12). They were humble artisans – so humble that some could view them as the 'rubbish of the world' (1 Corinthians 4:13).
- For the first three centuries of its life, the church had no 'churches'. From archaeological evidence, we know that Christians met in shops, warehouses and homes. (Acts 20:7-12 shows a church meeting in a third floor apartment).

EXPLORE

- In the video, Nick describes an early church meeting in the shop of Priscilla and Aquila. When did they meet? What did they do? What do we have in our services that they didn't? How might you replicate an early church meeting like that today?

- Read Acts 18:9-10, where Paul has a vision from the Lord. Can you think of other times when Paul has had a message in this way? Or other people in Acts?
- "Jesus was always calling people to movement, because it is only when you move out of your comfort zone that you find out how strong your faith really is." Have you experienced this? Is Jesus calling you out of your comfort zone right now?
- The early church carried their Scripture in their heads and their hearts. Is memorising Scripture part of your Christian practice? Are there significant passages that you could learn as individuals or groups? Or are there other ways to remember the truths of Scripture?

PRAY

All around the world, Christians meet in secret locations.

- In North Korea, Christians have held services in the toilets of labour camps. They 'sing' hymns in whispers so that no one can hear.
- For persecuted Christians, the most common form of meeting is in houses or apartments. People don't all arrive and leave at the same time, to avoid raising suspicion.
- In countries like Somalia, you will be arrested if you are found carrying a Bible. So Christians learn whole books of the Bible by heart.

We take for granted our ability to gather for worship. Yet around the world, Christians risk their lives to meet together. And in many countries this secret church is growing.

For the persecuted church

- Pray for protection for secret Christians around the world.
- Pray that their meetings will be filled with God's power and that they will be helped and sustained in their daily lives.
- Pray particularly for Christians who are isolated and alone, that God will comfort and encourage them.

For yourselves

Lord Jesus, we take seriously our commitment to gather together as the body of Christ. Help us not to take for granted our freedom to meet. Thank you for your gift of the Scriptures – help us to meditate on Your promises to us.



DANGEROUS FAITH

'In every city lies persecution'

Introduction

Chapters 20 and 21 of Acts tell of Paul's journey back to Jerusalem from Macedonia. Along the way, he stays with Christians in the places he passed through: in Troas, Miletus, Tyre, Ptolemais and Caesarea. During the journey he is warned that what he is planning is very dangerous – that he has enemies waiting for him in Jerusalem, and that he will be arrested.

Paul knows what is going to happen: and yet still he continues. He says, "I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

Paul knew that Jesus already had the victory. He knew that danger was waiting, but that nothing could stop him from proclaiming the gospel.

WATCH

Dangerous Faith
Part 8: 'In every city lies persecution'

READ

Acts 20:17–38; 21:7–14

A LITTLE BIT OF BACKGROUND

Time: April/May AD 57

- Paul left Philippi after Passover, aiming to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. In AD 57, Passover would have been on 7 April and Pentecost on 29 May.
- Agabus was a prophet from Jerusalem. We first hear of him in Antioch in Acts 11:27-28 when he predicts a famine which would affect the Roman world.
- In Caesarea, Paul stays with Philip – who had taken the gospel to Samaria some 24 years earlier when Stephen's death forced the church to move out of Jerusalem. And it was Paul, of course, who was partly responsible for that wave of persecution!

EXPLORE

- Imagine you are among that group advising Paul about his next move. What arguments would you use to persuade him not to go up to Jerusalem?
- In these passages there are repeated images of being bound, imprisoned or captured. But in Acts 20:22-23, Paul describes himself as a 'captive to the Spirit'. What do you think this means?

- Paul's friends were able to pray, in the face of all the warnings and anxieties: "The Lord's will be done." Has there been a time in your life when you had to pray that prayer? Perhaps you are facing a similar time, now?
- "In the Christian life, the only defeat is disobedience." Are there areas in your life where you want to claim Christ's victory? How are you being called to follow Christ instead of your own desires?

PRAY

Many persecuted Christians around the world deliberately risk arrest, imprisonment or even death in order to follow the call of the Holy Spirit.

- In Central Asia, Christians smuggle Bibles and Christian literature to places where it is illegal to possess such things.
- In Sudan, pastors continue to meet and preach, even though they know the slightest word out of place could mean imprisonment.
- In Pakistan, despite threats of violence, Christians have remained determined to meet together.

Struggling on with small congregations, in conditions of hardship and poverty, these people might look like failures; but they know that Christ has the victory.

For the persecuted church

- Pray for the families of believers who have been martyred for their faith.
- Pray for Christians in prison or under house arrest. Pray for those facing unfair trials or injustice.
- Pray that they will know that, whatever happens, Christ has the victory.

For yourselves

Lord, help us to see what the victorious Christian life looks like. Holy Spirit, help us resist being seduced by power or wealth or status, but instead to learn from Jesus, whose power was expressed in humility and service, and whose victory was death on the cross.

THANK YOU

Thank you for spending time with the dangerous faith of the first followers of Jesus.

Today, the book of Acts is still being lived out. On the streets of Somalia, in rural India, in the labour camps of North Korea – and in many more countries around the world, there are courageous Christians who need the support of their wider church family. They are our brothers and sisters, who have chosen to follow Jesus, no matter the danger, no matter the cost.

Your prayers, your gifts, your voice will bring hope

to Christians in the darkest and most dangerous places on earth. But it's not just a one-way relationship. As you connect more and more with the persecuted church, your faith will grow.

Whatever you can do will make a real difference. Here's what a North Korean underground church leader tells us:

"I cannot express our thankful hearts with any words in this world. With your loving support and care for our spiritual and physical lives, we can overcome any struggles and keep our faith until the end."



GIVE

You could provide a persecuted believer with a Bible. Or help a family survive with a monthly relief pack of food, medicine and clothing. Or equip an emergency response team to help Christian believers in crisis. Go online to see how you can support Christians living in the most dangerous places to follow Jesus.

PRAY

Sign up for regular emails which will help you to pray and to keep up to date with what's happening in the church around the world. Or why not join an Open Doors prayer group – or set one up yourself? Every two months you could receive Prayer News videos to help you pray and bring you face to face with persecuted Christians who live and work where faith costs the most.

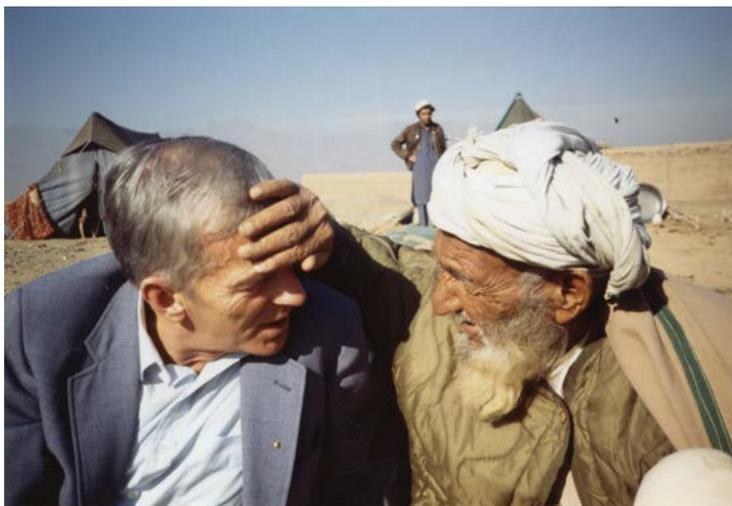
SPEAK UP

Our website contains all the resources you need to help you and your church speak up for persecuted Christians. Or you could invite an Open Doors speaker to help bring the story of the persecuted church to life in a whole new way. And spread the word even further: get your MP to raise the issue of Christian persecution in Parliament.

Go to www.opendoorsuk.org for more details on how you can stand alongside those whose faith puts them in danger.

“Jesus could have started the church Himself. He didn’t need the apostles. He took a risk working through those men. We are in the same position... God still looks for men and women who will step forward and become His visible presence.”

BROTHER ANDREW, FOUNDER OF OPEN DOORS



Brother Andrew with an Afghani refugee

In 1955 a man called Andrew went into Communist Europe and discovered a small and struggling church behind the Iron Curtain. The trip was to change his life. He became known as Brother Andrew, and dedicated his life to supporting these Christians in need, smuggling Bibles, raising awareness and simply letting them know that they were not forgotten.

As the work grew, he was joined by others and began a work of smuggling Bibles to believers in Communist countries. And today, Brother Andrew's small Dutch mission has grown to become Open Doors – an international ministry working in more than 60 nations to strengthen the persecuted church.

www.opendoorsuk.org

JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOOK OF ACTS WITH THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

Eight group studies on the Book of Acts. Each session contains video material, Bible reading, a discussion guide and prayer points.

Open Doors exists to strengthen and support persecuted Christians, wherever they are and for as long as they need help.

Through the gifts and prayers of Open Doors supporters, millions of persecuted Christians around the world receive food and medicine, spiritual care, training and legal advice. They get their hands on smuggled Bibles and literature. Homes are rebuilt, lives are rescued, churches are restored.

Join the secret network today at www.opendoorsuk.org and bring hope to Christians in the darkest and most dangerous places on earth.

