

BIBLE STUDIES

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STUDY SERIES:

POSTCARDS FROM AFAR

ACTS 17-19

A new year brings new opportunities to proclaim Jesus. Journey with the Apostle Paul and be inspired to play your part in God's work of mission and ministry here in the lower mountains.



BEFORE WE BEGIN

It is quite apt to be looking at Paul's missionary journey in January, when many people are away on their holidays. As we look at the narrative in the book of Acts, we can not only take to heart the boldness of the Apostles in proclaiming Jesus, but also see how God uses ordinary people in the advance of His Kingdom. This should inspire and motivate us to proclaim Jesus in mission and ministry, especially as we enter a brand new year.

Postcards used to be a thing you sent when you went on holidays. In this series, of 'postcards from afar', what we are looking at is kind of like postcards that the Apostle Paul might have sent from his missionary journeys that we find in chapters 16 - 19 of the book of Acts. We need to remember one thing about postcards: they mostly never go into great detail about everything that has happened on the holiday but often highlight the most significant things that happen. This can also be said of what Luke records about Paul's journeys in the book of Acts. Not all the details are there, but what is there is there for a reason. What we find in the book of Acts is the risen and ascended Jesus working in His world to grow His Kingdom.

Chapters 1-5 of Acts have prepared the scene; detailing the growth of the church and the spreading of the gospel, with a particular focus on the ministry and leadership of the apostle Peter, culminating in the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. The mission to the gentiles really begins with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, which is the the focus of what has been called 'the second missionary journey' in Acts chapters 16 to 19.

The significance of this journey however not is that it is the second journey of the Apostle Paul, it is more that in these four chapters we encounter real lives of real people that become the recipients later on of many of the epistles of the Apostle Paul. And this is the main idea of this series, as we see something like Paul's 'postcards' from his journey to these people for whom he later writes his letters.

study 1.

POSTCARD FROM PHILIPPI

“DARE TO BE DIFFERENT”



Acts 16:11-40

Our first postcard almost sounds like the beginning to a bad joke: “There was a businesswoman, a slave girl and a prison warden ...” But it’s not a joke. In this first postcard we find out about three very different and distinct people, united by something that they are going to have in common.

The book of Acts is basically the account of how God used his apostles, his first witnesses, to establish his church in the world after Jesus returned to heaven. We’re picking it up at chapter 16, and looking at the second missionary trip that Paul took, picking up the story in the city of Philippi.

Read ACTS 16, verses 11-15.

What typical postcard type information do we get in verses 11 & 12?

Then where did they go in verse 13 and why?

Who do we meet in verse 14 and what can we know about her from the description we get?

What does the fact that this woman Lydia is mentioned by name tell us about her (noting also the fact that we get her profession and city as well)?

What are two other important bits of information we get about her in the second part of verse 14?

Why are these two things important for us to take note of?
What are the implications for us in our day and age?

Even though people of Paul's day were religious people, even people who were sincere and devout, God still used him to take the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to these people. Paul **dared to be different** in proclaiming the gospel and calling people to repentance and faith in Jesus to a society who were set in their religious beliefs and practices.

What happened next, after Lydia became a believer of Jesus, and what do you think we might be able to take from her response for us here and now?

Read verses 16-24.

Who do we meet in verses 16-17 and what did she do?

Why do you think Paul did what he did in verse 18?

What were the consequences of Paul's actions, in verses 19-24?

Here it feels like the turning point in the postcard. It is a key moment. How are Paul and Silas going to respond when daring to be different leads to un favourable and unwanted results (and maybe even unexpected results)?

Read verse 25!

How did they respond and how does this challenge you and me?

Their response is the very definition of daring to be different. As we move on in the postcard, in verses 25-40, we can see that it leads to another family being added to God's Kingdom.

Read verses 25-40

How did Paul and Silas 'dare to be different' in verse 28 and what were the consequences in verses 29-34?

In what ways might these things challenge us?

The postcard from Philippi finishes in verses 35-40 with one final response from Paul & Silas that showed that they dared to be different. Obviously the authorities felt that a public flogging and a night in gaol would have taught Paul and Silas their lesson and they would be happy to be on their way. But their response is different.

They didn't want to be quietly pushed out of the city. What they were teaching wasn't just another little unauthorised religion. What they were teaching was the truth about God. The truth that he sent his son Jesus into the world to die so that forgiveness for sin is possible for everyone who believes, and trusts their lives to Jesus.

They dared to be different. They dared to stand up for the truth and not be quietly pushed out of the city.

What might have been another reason that it was good for them not to just 'go quietly' and not defend themselves?

Their suffering was for the gospel in more ways than one. In his letter to the Philippian church later on, Paul reminds them of this, and reminds them that just as he dared to be different, so should they.

In the end, there must have been lots of people in the town being converted while Paul and Silas were there, because we read in his letter to the Philippian church, that he is talking to a group of believers. He writes not just to one person, or not just to three households, but to a church.

So there must have been a number of conversions in order for the church to have been started, but in Acts chapter 16, Luke records only three people – a businesswoman, a slave girl, and a prison warden.

These three are completely different people, with different jobs, different habits, different pasts. These three people are probably the highlights mentioned in this postcard because of their differences. Because we're being shown that being saved through Christ is open to all people no matter your background, or your nationality, or your status in the community, your past failures or successes do not matter either.

Read Philippians 1:27-30

Reflect on the weight of the words “whatever happens” in the context of what DID happen to Paul and Silas in this city.

- Have you understood what it is to be saved?
- Have you accepted that on the cross Jesus took the punishment that you and I deserve?
- Have you accepted forgiveness and eternal life that God offers through faith in Jesus?

If you have, then Paul's postcard from Philippi says dare to be different!

If you have, then your new life has started.

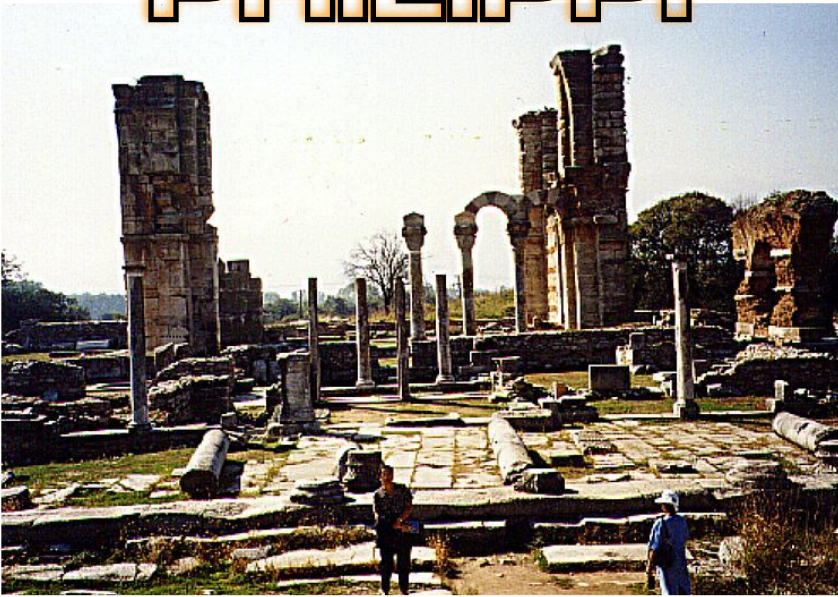
If you have, you no longer need to conform to what the world says you should be like.

If you have then you ought to be challenged to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel”!

Pray for each other about what things in your life God might be challenging you to dare to be different and live your life in a manner worthy of his gospel.

**WHATEVER HAPPENS, CONDUCT
YOURSELVES IN A MANNER WORTHY OF THE
GOSPEL OF CHRIST. (PHILIPPIANS 1:27A)**

PHILIPPI



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study 2.

POSTCARD FROM THESSALONICA & BEREIA

“BE COURAGEOUS AND CLEAR”



Acts 17:1-14

Our second postcard reminds me of something I learned from watching the TV show, CSI: that if you are searching for truth, you need to listen to the evidence. If you want to prove something, your theory needs to make sense of the evidence that is there. This postcard seems to show us the way that the Apostle Paul proved his message about Jesus from the evidence. This postcard however is from two cities, Thessalonica and Berea.

We are going to notice a few more differences in this postcard from the last one as well, the biggest difference being the types of things he writes about. Last time the highlights were the way three different people became

followers of Jesus, but in his one there are so many details like that. What we have is a description of the way that Paul tells people about Jesus.

Although there are two cities, not one, what happens in each city follows the same pattern, and in fact there are some of the same people in both cities.

Read Acts 17:1-14

As always, the postcard begins with some of the travel details. Look again at **verses 1 and 10**. Why do you think Paul went to the synagogue as his first port of call when he reached a new city on his missionary journey?

From **verses 2 & 3**, what did Paul actually DO when he went into the synagogue (hint: three words to describe what he did)?

Why did he do this?

Do you think that there is an implication for what we do? Is there a model from Paul's evangelistic method of the first century and the context of this city that might be an example for us in our context and location?

Skip ahead quickly to **verse 11**. What is the same and what is different when it comes to the city of Berea?

Is there something from the response of the Bereans that challenge us (as individuals and/or as a church), and our response to the preaching of the gospel?

Why do you think that Paul uses the Scriptures to convince people of the identity of Jesus?

How are our attempts at evangelism follow Paul's model, and how are they different? Are there good reasons for these differences?

Look again at **verses 4-9 & 12-13**. How did the people in each city respond to what Paul and Silas were teaching?

Does this inform our expectations for what will happen when we preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ? Why/why not?

What does it mean to “be of more noble character”? Is this true of you?

If Paul and Silas experience persecution for their preaching and their evangelistic methods, why on earth would they just move to another city and do exactly what they did in the previous city that got them into so much trouble? Although we get a lot of details in this postcard, we don't really get the WHY question answered. Which might be why we get his longer letter to the Thessalonians. You get certain details in a postcard, but often a letter is where you are able explain the why question.

Read **1 Thessalonians 2:1-9**. What is the answer to the why question in this part of his letter (hint: check out verse 4)?

In what way can you and I say the same thing, that is, is this true of us? Should it be? Why/why not?

One thing that we can take away from this postcard is the encouragement to be **courageous and clear**. The basic pattern shows that proclaiming Jesus requires courage and clarity. We can't do that without being soaked in God's word ourselves. Firstly, because WE need to examine the teaching we receive in the light of the Scriptures. Secondly so that we are ABLE to reason, explain, and prove who Jesus is, the central message of the Christian faith. Thirdly, we need to rely on God for the courage to proclaim Jesus boldly and clearly, even in the face of the worldly opposition that we should expect.

Pray for each other about some of the challenges you might face in your living to please God, being courageous and clear.

NOW THE BEREAN JEWS WERE OF MORE NOBLE CHARACTER ... FOR THEY RECEIVED THE MESSAGE WITH GREAT EAGERNESS AND EXAMINED THE SCRIPTURES EVERY DAY TO SEE IF WHAT PAUL SAID WAS TRUE.
(ACTS 17:11)

THESSALONICA



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study 3.

POSTCARD FROM ATHENS

“THE GODS WE SERVE”

Acts 17:16-34



We need to be in touch with the society in which we live if we want to effectively connect with people and communicate the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul worked hard to introduce the ‘unknown god’ to the people of Athens. The irony of course is that this is the only God who speaks! Pay close attention in Paul’s speech to the word play between ‘the god who made us’ and ‘the gods we make’.

So it seems as if having been taken to the coast (Acts 17:14), Paul is taken to Athens, presumably by a beautiful

Mediterranean cruise. And yet we get none of those details in this postcard. It's more like he was deposited in Athens for his own safety and was awaiting his missionary companions, when he just can't help himself!

Read Acts 17:16-21

What is different in the way this postcard begins?

It is a challenge to us to also be 'greatly distressed' when we look at our city, because most of us have become numb to the idols of our culture.

After the information about his motivation, we see Paul straight back into what he has been doing in verse 17 - reasoning in the synagogue with Jews and God-fearing Greeks - but what is different in this city in what he does and where he ends up?

It's interesting that we get a mention of both Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the same sentence as these guys has opposing philosophies: the Stoic philosophy was to deny physical pleasures whilst the Epicureans saw pleasure as the supreme good! But both of them were wanting to debate Paul. What grabbed their attention?

Read Acts 17:22-31

How does Paul connect with his listeners at the very start of his speech?

Is there anything in his model that we should emulate?

After making a connection, what does Paul tell them about the true and living God?

Why do you think verses 27 & 28 would have been radical to the thinkers of the city of Athens?

How might what Paul has said so far give our life a meaning and purpose?

In verses 29-31, what is the big punch in the gut? What is it that God requires, and who does he require it of?

Take a moment to summarise the four key points that Paul makes in his speech.

Can you see how at every point the people of Athens always tended to minimise God and maximise themselves? Which is why Paul tries to make them understand the truth about the

God who made us rather than the gods we make (in our image).

What do you think would have been the hardest thing for the Athenians to hear in all of what Paul has said in his speech that we have recorded for us?

Or what for YOU is the hardest thing to hear?

Look now at **Acts 17:32-34**. What seems to be the hardest thing for them to hear?

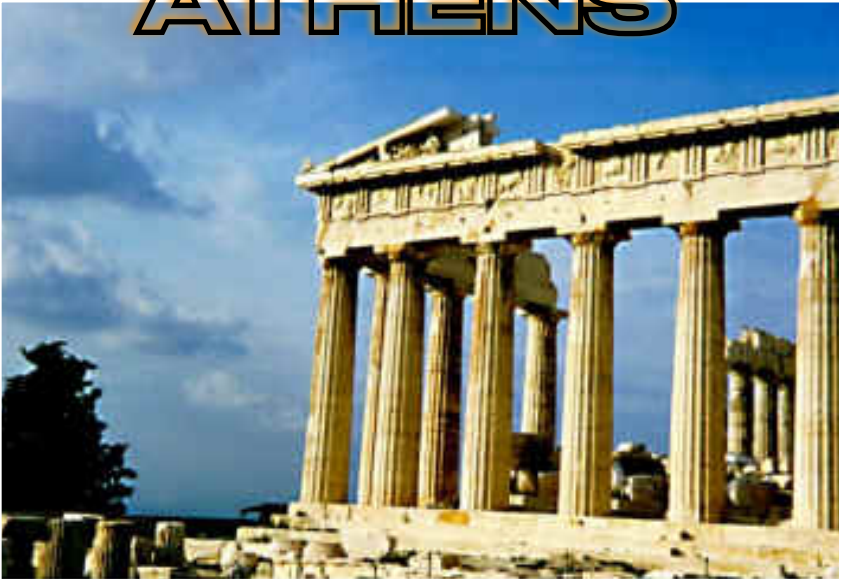
What were the three responses to Paul's speech?

Why do you think we get all these details as the conclusion to this postcard?

So how might we put into practice Paul's model of evangelism in our own context?

IN THE PAST GOD OVERLOOKED SUCH IGNORANCE, BUT NOW HE COMMANDS ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE TO REPENT. (ACTS 17:30)

ATHENS



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study 4.

POSTCARD FROM CORINTH

NO FEAR, NO SILENCE

Acts 18:1-17



Don Carson is a great Christian teacher who works in the USA but travels all over the world to teach. He is Canadian, and when he came to Sydney, he began the first of a series of lectures with a joke. He is a brilliant man, whose talks are complex and full of big words, but they are great. So it was exciting when he began with a joke. The joke started out well, had everyone hooked and brought us along in the story to the point where we are anticipating the punch line - which he delivered in French. About 3 people laughed and the other 500 just sitting there going, 'wait, what?' Like many things, in telling a good joke, it's not just the way you begin, but the way you finish that is important. This postcard is from Corinth, a city whose church started well, but as we find out later on, didn't stay that way.

Corinth as a city was a very strategic place for the apostle Paul to establish as a centre for proclaiming Jesus. It was one of the great commercial centres of its time because where it was situated meant that much of the trade for the entire region came through there. And so it was a good place from which to fulfil Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8 that the apostles would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth - both geographically and ethnically.

Read Acts 18:1-4

It seems we get a little more introductory details in each postcard. What details do we get before Paul does what he does and hit the synagogue, and what is different from previous postcards?

What changed in verse 5?

How do these things suggest that the ministry in Corinth was off to a good start?

It didn't take long for things to get ugly. It's interesting that the Jews became abusive - maybe because deep down they could see that they were wrong, so as they couldn't attack the logic, they attacked the man?

What is Paul talking about in verse 6 when he responds to their abuse (hint: check out Ezekiel 33)?

Even in this parting shot, Paul is pointing them to their own Scriptures in the hope that they might turn back to God and be saved.

In what way is verse 7 not just a change of scene, but a change of tactics, and how does this relate to Acts 1:8?

In what ways could we look at verses 8-11 as a 'great start' to the Christian church at Corinth?

In verse 11 there is a detail that we can often overlook. The apostle Paul, on his missionary journey actually stayed with them for a year and half, teaching the the word of God.

What implications might this have for us as we think about doing 'mission'?

So then, it appears that this church is off to a great start, and with God promising to be with Paul and that nobody was going to attack him, surely nothing could stand in their way in this city? Read verses 12-17 again!

How did the Jews attack Paul this time, in this city?

What was new or different about the result this time?

What we didn't read was the start of verse 18 - read it now. This time, the attack by the Jews didn't affect Paul's ministry. What God promised, he delivered. What a great start for this Christian church in Corinth! And yet something went wrong. Turn to Paul's first letter to this church in Corinth.

Read **1 Corinthians 1:10-17**.

How did this church that started so well, not finish in the same way?

If we were to go on and read the whole of that first letter, there is issue after issue that Paul raises to rebuke them. How did something that started so well in the postcard not finish well? It all started with thinking that they could 'move on' from the gospel; that they were too smart for such a simple message. They added things to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected.

What are we tempted to 'move on' from, in our day and age, that would derail any good start that we might have made?

In a good joke, it's not the way you start that is most important, but the way you finish. In our lives as Christians, we need a good start, but remaining to the end is more important. As a Christian church, it is great to make a good start, but remaining faithful to the end is more important. (If you are keen, you can jump ahead and read Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesians church in Acts 20:17-38)

How might we remain faithful to the gospel in our lives and in our church?

**FOR THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS IS
FOOLISHNESS TO THOSE WHO ARE
PERISHING, BUT TO US WHO ARE BEING
SAVED IT IS THE POWER OF GOD.**

(1 CORINTHIANS 1:18)

CORINTH



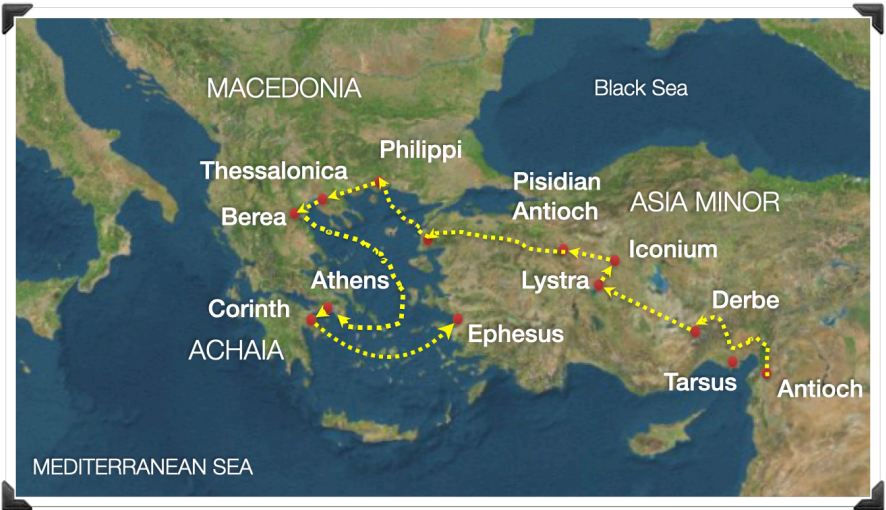
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study 5.

POSTCARD FROM EPHESUS

DON'T BE FOOLED BY FAKES

Acts 19



Nobody likes to be fooled into thinking that they have the genuine article when in reality it is a fake. Advertisers understand this too. Over the years, we have been told that Coke is 'the real thing', or that 'oil's 'ain't oils' (only Caltex oil is real). These days there is even this idea that we can be getting 'fake news'. There are indeed advertisements on radio that are 'paid opinions' and 'influencers' on social media get paid to 'review' products all the time. How can we tell what is real and what is fake? Often there are signs that help us identify what is real and what is fake, the trick is in recognising these signs. In Paul's postcard from Ephesus, we get a hint that what you need is the genuine article, that when you're searching for the truth, don't be fooled by fakes. And that there are signs that we can recognise what is genuine.

We are at our final of five ‘postcards from afar’ and in each city, we notice that Paul follows the same basic routine.

What is the basic pattern that we have seen in each postcard?

And yet in each city there is also something different, something unique to each city that is often particular to their context or situation. We don’t have to go too far in this postcard to find one of these differences. **Read Acts 18:1-7.**

Why did the disciples of John the Baptist not know about the Holy Spirit?

What was the sign that in Jesus they had the genuine article?

The Christian ‘genuine trademark’ is the Holy Spirit, sent by the ascended Jesus. Without the fulfilment of the expectation that Jesus brings, it is a ‘fake’ faith in that it is incomplete. But we can be fooled when we don’t listen to the WHOLE message of the gospel and just want to focus on one part. That leads to an incomplete (or even fake) faith.

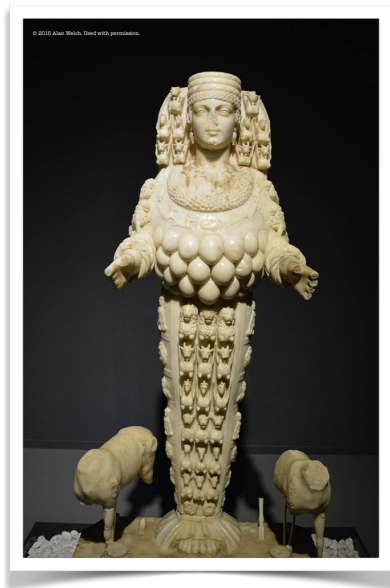
What can we be tempted to focus on and what can we be tempted to leave out when it comes to the Christian faith?

Read Acts 19:8-10.

Now we are back into the regular pattern that we have seen. But what is striking to you about the details about the preaching ministry in Ephesus (see if you can come up with three things)?

Read Acts 19:11-20.

What are some of the things that we immediately notice in comparison with all the other 'postcards'?



Statue of Artemis in
Ephesus

Ephesus was a city full of magic cults and most famously home to the temple of Artemis the fertility goddess. It is a city full of people steeped in all things supernatural. Remember that when we were in Athens, the postcard highlighted the way Paul interacted with the philosophers, and God used debates and wisdom to bring people to himself. Yet here, it is the miraculous display of his power that wins people to his kingdom.

What does this show us about God - who he is and what he does?

Read Acts 19:23-41.

What was the motivation for the riots this time?

What is the irony here when it comes to the genuine versus the fake?

The 'trademark' of the genuine Christian faith is repentance and faith in Jesus. When we try and add anything else as central to what it means to be genuinely Christian, even good things like good works or miraculous displays of the gifts of the Spirit, we are headed towards being fooled by a fake version of what a Christian is. Being in Christ means we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we have the guarantee that we are his, we have the 'authenticity stamp' of the Christian faith. But when we are encouraged to trust a certain preacher, or rituals, or anything the WE do, then we run the risk of being fooled by a fake version of Christianity.

It is worthwhile, having looked at the postcard from Ephesus and Paul's ministry amongst the people of that city, to read Paul's farewell speech to them in **Acts 20:17-30**.

Pray together in response to what we read, especially asking for the Holy Spirit to empower us to boldly proclaim Jesus in mission and ministry.

I HAVE DECLARED TO BOTH JEWS AND GREEKS THAT THEY MUST TURN TO GOD IN REPENTANCE AND HAVE FAITH IN OUR LORD JESUS. (ACTS 20:21)

EPHESUS



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PRAYER POINTS

