

Acts

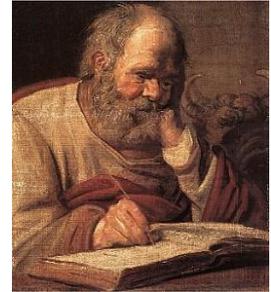
By Ross Callaghan

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Acts is sometimes called the “Acts of the Apostles”, or the “Acts of the Holy Spirit”. It describes the early years of the Christian Church as the gospel was being spread throughout the Roman Empire.

Author

Acts was written by Luke, *the beloved physician*, (Colossians 4:14) and is a sequel to Luke’s gospel. Luke was one of the Apostle Paul’s major supporters and travelled with him on some of his missionary journeys (shown by the use of the word “we” in the section between Acts 16:10 and 28:16). Unlike most of the other New Testament writers, Luke was a Gentile. He was converted to Christianity in the early days of the Christian church and was obviously well educated as shown by his sophisticated way of writing and his excellent use of the Greek language.



Written to

Theophilus. Theophilus was probably a Gentile who had become a believer. His name means *beloved of God*, and, as such, he stands for all those who would come to read Luke and Acts in future years. In his gospel Luke explained that he was writing to Theophilus so that he would *know with certainty the things he had been taught*. Now he writes that *in my former book I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day He was taken up into heaven* and describes what happened after this.

Date

Acts describes the period between Jesus’ resurrection (about 29 or 30 AD) and Paul’s imprisonment in Rome (about 64 AD). We know that it was written sometime after Luke’s gospel, but the actual date when it was written cannot be stated with certainty.

Background

Acts begins by describing how the Holy Spirit was poured on the apostles on the Day of Pentecost. Jesus had told them to wait till this happened so they would receive *power from on high* and then go and spread the gospel throughout the world. Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-20; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 1:1-11.

Initially the Apostles shared the gospel in Jerusalem (Chapters 3-7) and then, as a result of persecution, throughout Judea and Samaria. (Chapters 8-12). After the conversion of Paul, the gospel spread throughout the rest of the known world, particularly through Paul’s three missionary journeys in Asia Minor and Greece. (Chapters 13-28).

The gospel spread rapidly in the first 30 years of the Christian church and many were saved. This was in the face of much opposition from Jewish leaders and from Roman officials. The faith, courage and obedience of the early Christians was severely tested at times. Yet they persevered! The fledgling Christian church that was established through the early Christians continues to this day and its mandate to share the good news of salvation that is only to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ remains the same.

Purpose

- To give an accurate and orderly account of the beginnings of the Christian church.
- To defend the Christian movement in the light of false charges brought against it, especially that Christianity was a threat to the stability of the Roman Empire.
- To clarify misconceptions held about Christianity, especially as some considered it to be just a sect of Judaism.
- To demonstrate the authenticity of Jesus’ resurrection and prove the validity of Christianity.
- To show that, through Jesus Christ, salvation is available to all - Jews and Gentiles alike.
- To show how God’s great plan of salvation was being implemented and that the Kingdom of God was spreading throughout the world.

Outline

1:1-11. Background.

Luke begins his account by reminding Theophilus of what he had said in his *former book* (Luke's gospel).

Jesus:

- showed Himself to many and gave *many convincing proofs that He was alive*.
- gave instructions to the apostles to wait in Jerusalem till they received the gift promised by the Father – to be *baptised with the Holy Spirit*. (Luke 24:49).
- explained that when the Holy Spirit came on them they would *receive power* and would be His witnesses *in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*.
- was taken up into heaven.
- would come back in the same way that He went to heaven.



1:12-26. Choosing a new apostle to replace Judas.

After Jesus went to heaven His followers returned to Jerusalem. There were about 120 of them. Peter emerged as the leader and suggested that another apostle was needed to replace Judas who had died in the way forecast in Psalm 69:25. Someone else should *take his place of leadership* as required in Psalm 109:8. The person had to be one who had been with Jesus from when He was baptised, and who was a *witness with us of the resurrection*.

Joseph Barsabbas (also known as Justus), and Matthias were proposed. After prayer and the casting of lots *Matthias was added to the eleven apostles*. There is no further mention of Matthias. Other apostles like Paul were later added to the group.

Choosing of church leaders

Matthias was chosen by casting of lots after a time of prayer. This doesn't seem a very "spiritual" way of choosing church leaders, and certainly doesn't set a precedent for how church leaders should be chosen today. What is important for us is to seek God's will and then act in obedience when He reveals the people He wants to lead His church.

2:1-13. The Holy Spirit poured out on the Day of Pentecost.

The day of Pentecost was 50 days after the Passover. The disciples were *all together in one place* and the Holy Spirit *came to rest on each of them*, just as Jesus had promised. (1:4,5). *They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues as the Spirit enabled them*. This initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit gave the disciples *power* so they could be witnesses for Christ in Jerusalem and then throughout the known world. (1:8). In Acts 1:5 it is described as being baptised (immersed) in or with the Holy Spirit. The baptism in the Holy Spirit is still needed by Christians today so they can have power to be effective witnesses for Christ.

Crowds gathered including people from many nations and they were amazed when they heard the disciples *declaring the wonders of God in their own tongues*.

Speaking in tongues

When the disciples received the Holy Spirit they spoke in tongues (Greek *glossolalia* - languages), a phenomenon that is explained in 1 Corinthians 14:1-19. When you speak in tongues your spirit prays, and this edifies or builds you up, as your spirit is exercised. Your mind is unfruitful and so doesn't censor what you are praying.

Acts shows that speaking in tongues often occurred as people became Christians and were baptised in the Holy Spirit. The same is true today.

2:14-41. Peter preaches to the crowd.

Peter explained that what was happening was in fulfilment of Joel 2:28-32. The Holy Spirit was being poured out *on all people* in powerful ways and *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*. Salvation was now available through Jesus who was *accredited by God*, did many miracles as they already knew, and who was put to death by nailing Him to the cross. But *God raised Him from the dead – it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him*, as David said in Psalm 16:8-11. David died but he knew God would *place one of his descendants on the throne*. That was Jesus, the Christ (Messiah) who God raised to life and is *now exalted to the right hand of God*. He is the One who poured out the Holy Spirit as they were seeing and hearing. *God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ*.

When the people heard Peter's gospel message they were cut to the heart and asked what they should do in response. His answer is still the way by which people can become Christians today. *Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the promise of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.*

Notice that Peter's gospel message was totally based on the resurrection of Jesus. This is a consistent platform throughout all of Acts. In rising from the dead Jesus proved that He was God and that the gospel He taught was the only way of salvation. Because Jesus has risen from the dead anyone can now become a Christian and have a relationship with God. The foundational experiences on which the Christian life is built are:

- repentance from sin, leading to forgiveness and cleansing
- belief in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation
- trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord for daily living
- baptism in water to signify death of the old life and resurrection into the new
- baptism in the Holy Spirit to receive power to live the Christian life and to share the gospel with others.

Peter pleaded with the crowd and that day about three thousand were saved.

2:42-47. The fellowship of the believers.

The early Christians soon established a "church life". They:

- devoted themselves to the apostles' *teaching and to fellowship*
- *broke bread* together (probably meaning that they ate together, although they are also likely to have shared in communion)
- prayed together
- performed many *wonders and signs*
- were united and *had everything in common*
- *sold their* property and possessions and gave to anyone who had need.
- met together daily in the temple courts
- praised God together
- *enjoyed the favor of all the people*

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Copying the early church

Sometimes Christians today try to copy what was done in the early Church. This is not always a wise thing to do as the cultural situation then was quite different to what we live in today.

Most Christians are happy to listen to teaching, and share in fellowship, communion and prayer (as the early Church did). Few are willing to go to the Jewish temple daily, or sell their homes and possessions and give to those in need. (Note the consequences of not doing this in Acts 5:1-11). Just because something was done in a certain way in the early Church doesn't mean we have to do it that way today. We are to be led by the Holy Spirit and He will always be relevant for our current situation.

Peter preaches after a beggar is healed. 3:1-26.

Peter and John were going to the temple when a beggar asked them for money. Peter said "*Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.*" The man was healed and the crowd was amazed when they saw him *walking and praising God*. Peter said they didn't need to be surprised at this. God had *raised Jesus from the dead* and *complete healing* had come to the man in *Jesus' name and the faith that comes through Him*.

Peter used this situation as yet another opportunity to preach the gospel to the people. *Repent, then, and turn to God, so that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that He may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as He promised long ago through the holy prophets.* All of the prophets including Moses and Samuel had pointed forward to the time when Jesus would come bring blessing as people turned *from their wicked ways*.



Repentance is always the start of God's way of salvation. Once someone's sins have been forgiven and they turn to the Lord times of great refreshment and restoration come. Jesus has not yet returned, so God's great plan of salvation, refreshment and restoration is still being worked out today.

Peter and John preach to the Sanhedrin. 4:1-22

The religious leaders were *greatly disturbed* that Peter and John were *proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead*. How ironic! They should have been rejoicing like the *many who heard the message and believed*. The religious leaders had Peter and John put in jail and next day brought them before the high priest. Peter again used this as an opportunity to preach the gospel. He said they had healed the man *by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead*. The religious leaders had rejected Jesus (Psalm 118:22), but now *salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*. The leaders noted that Peter and John were *ordinary men* who had *been with Jesus* and wondered what they could do to stop the spread of the gospel. They *commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus* but Peter said they had to *obey God* and that they *couldn't help speaking about what we have seen and heard*. Peter and John were *let go* and the people praised God for the miracle that had happened.

When they reported what had happened to the disciples there was much prayer and praise (quoting from Psalm 2:1,2) and they asked God to enable them to speak His word with even more boldness and that God would *stretch out His hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders* in Jesus' name. A good prayer to pray, and one that God loves to answer!

The community of the believers. 4:32-5:11.

At that stage the believers were *one in heart and mind* and *shared everything they had* so there were *no needy persons among them*. Some sold their houses and land and the money was distributed to those in need. Ananias and Saphira sold a piece of property but *kept back part of the money*. Peter recognised that Satan had filled their heart and that they had *lied to the Holy Spirit*. Ananias immediately died and three hours later his wife also died after trying to cover up their deception. *Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events*. It would! This shows the absolute importance of transparency before God and others. There is no place for deception within the Body of Christ.

Persecution of the apostles. 5:12-42.

The apostles *performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people*, and many were saved and healed. Crowds gathered *bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed*. The religious leaders were *filled with jealousy* and had the apostles put in jail, but an angel set them free and told them to *tell the people the full message of this new life*. Brought again before the Sanhedrin (who had forbidden them to speak of Jesus) the apostles said *We must obey God rather than men*. They said that God had raised Jesus from the dead to *give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel* and they were witnesses of this fact, as was the Holy Spirit *who God has given to those who obey Him*. The religious leaders were furious and wanted to put them to death but Gamaliel said to leave them alone. *For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God*. The apostles were let go and were ordered to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, but *day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ*.

Choosing of seven to serve. 6:1-7.

The twelve apostles felt it would not be right for them to *neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables* (for the *daily distribution of food*). Seven men were chosen for this who were *full of the Spirit and*

Witnessing for Christ

Notice how confidently the early disciples shared what they had *seen and heard* about Jesus. They couldn't help talking about Him! They took every opportunity to explain about Jesus' resurrection, and the love and the salvation He offers. Sharing what you have seen and heard about Jesus is called 'witnessing for Christ'. It's something all Christians should do to *obey God*, and because we *cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard*.

Persecution

Persecution was a consistent part of early church life. The new Christians shared the gospel with everyone they possibly could, and did it with passion. This was not appreciated by many, especially religious and Roman leaders who were threatened by the growing church. Persecution resulted in the church spreading rapidly into new areas. These days persecution is uncommon in the west, but still occurs in many countries. Imagine what would happen if all Christians today shared the gospel with everyone they possibly could, and did it with passion! Yes, there would be more persecution, but maybe there would be a much greater spread of the gospel?

wisdom. They were set apart for their ministry when the apostles *prayed and laid their hands on them*. This was the beginning of the recognition of different ministries that people could have within the church. See 1 Corinthians 12:1-31; Romans 12:4-8. Stephen and Philip were among those set aside at this time. Both had very powerful ministries, although Stephen's was quite short-lived.

Stephen's ministry and martyrdom. 6:8-8:3.

Stephen was a man full of God's grace and power, who did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Predictably opposition to his ministry came from the Jewish leaders who argued with him and *stirred up the people* against him. He was brought before the Sanhedrin and accused of speaking against the temple and the law. His face was like the face of an angel.

In answering the charges against him Stephen outlined the history of how God had called His people through Abraham, Joseph and Moses and how they had consistently *refused to obey Him*. In the desert they had the tabernacle (even though *the Most High does not live in houses made by man*) and it remained in the Promised Land until the time of David and Solomon when the temple was built.

They were a stiff-necked people, just like their fathers who resisted the Holy Spirit, persecuted the prophets and even killed the Righteous One – the Messiah – Jesus. When they heard this they were furious and stoned Stephen to death. As he was dying Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look" he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God". Saul, later called Paul was there, giving approval to his death.

A great persecution broke out against the church so all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. This just led to a greater spreading of the gospel.

Ministry between Samaria and Caesarea. 8:4-40.

Philip went down to Samaria and proclaimed the Christ. This was quite significant because as a Jew he would not naturally have anything to do with Samaritans. (John 4:9). Many were healed and delivered from evil spirits and there was great joy in that city. Simon the magician became a believer and, along with many others, was baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God they sent Peter and John to pray that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus. Simon wanted to buy the ability to lay hands on people so they could receive the Holy Spirit but had to repent for having such a thought in his heart.

An angel told Philip to go south and on the road he met a eunuch who was in charge of the treasury of Candace the Queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch was reading Isaiah 53:7,8 and asked Philip to explain its meaning. Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. The eunuch was saved and baptised immediately, then Philip was taken away and continued preaching in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Saul's conversion. 9:1-31.

Saul (later the apostle Paul) was a Jewish leader who strongly persecuted the church. He was on his way to Damascus to capture Christians when the Lord appeared to him as a light from heaven and asked "Why do you persecute Me?" Saul asked "Who are you, Lord" and the Lord answered that He was Jesus. Saul was blinded and told to go into Damascus where he would be told what to do.

Martyrdom

Stephen was the first Christian martyr and he died seeing a vision of Jesus at the right hand of the Father, in heaven.

Stephen was the first of many who have given their lives for the gospel. In fact almost all of the early Christians were martyrs for the Lord. These days martyrdom still occurs, particularly in countries where there is strong antagonism to Christianity. Christian martyrs are heroes of the faith and encourage us all to share the gospel regardless of the cost. Greater love has no-one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. John 15:13.

Initial Christian experiences.

This passage (and many others in Acts) shows how the early Christians made sure that the gospel was open to all who would believe, and that new believers experienced the three initial Christian experiences:

- Salvation by believing in Jesus
- Water baptism to signify the death of the old way of life
- Baptism in the Holy Spirit to receive the power of the Holy Spirit.



In Damascus Ananias was given a vision in which he was to welcome Saul and pray that he might receive his sight back. Ananias was predictably nervous about this but God reassured him that Saul was God's *chosen instrument to carry My name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel*. Ananias welcomed Saul and prayed for him so he received the Holy Spirit. *Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again* and he was baptised.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus and immediately began to preach that *Jesus is the Son of God*. People were astonished that the one who had sought to kill Christians was *now proving that Jesus is the Christ*. Some Jews conspired to kill Saul but he was rescued by lowering him in a basket over the city wall. In Jerusalem the disciples were initially afraid of Saul not believing that *he really was a disciple* but Barnabas told them how Saul had been saved and then *preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus*. He was accepted and sent to Caesarea and then to his home town of Tarsus.

The church then experienced a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the lord.

Peter's ministry 9:32-11:18

Peter was one of Jesus' closest disciples and one of the main leaders of the early church. He had a powerful ministry in Lydda where the Lord healed a paralytic named Aeneas, and in Joppa where Tabitha was raised from the dead. Word got out and *many people believed in the Lord*.

The Roman centurion Cornelius then had a vision in which God said his prayers would be answered through Peter, so he sent for him. At the time Peter was praying and became hungry. God gave him a vision of all kinds of four-footed animals, reptiles and birds, and he was told to kill and eat them. Peter said *"Surely not, Lord, I have never eaten anything impure or unclean"*. (As per the requirements of the Jewish law). God told him not to *call anything impure that God has made clean*. This happened three times. Peter wondered what the vision meant and immediately received an invitation to go to Cornelius' house in Caesarea and was told by the Holy Spirit to do so.

Peter went to Caesarea and entered Cornelius' house, even though it was *against the law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him*. He explained that God had shown him that he should *not call any man impure or unclean*. Peter recognised that *God does not show favouritism but accepts people from every nation who fear Him and do what's right*. He then shared the gospel about Jesus and His resurrection and how *everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name*. While Peter was still speaking *the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message* and those who had come with Peter were *astonished* for they *heard them speaking in tongues and praising God*. Peter said there was *no reason why they shouldn't be baptised* as they had *received the Holy Spirit* just as he had so the new Gentile believers were baptised.

Back in Jerusalem Peter was criticised for associating with Gentiles so he explained what had happened in his vision and at Cornelius' house. The other church leaders recognised that the Holy Spirit had come upon the Gentiles in the same way that He had come upon them when they were *baptised with the Holy Spirit*, so *God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life*.

The church spreads to Antioch. 11:19-30

Persecution led to expansion of the church to Antioch and the disciples *began to speak to Greeks also, telling them about the Lord Jesus*. *The Lord's hand was with them and many turned to the Lord*. When the church in Jerusalem heard this they sent Barnabas *a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith* to encourage and teach them. Barnabas first went to Tarsus to collect Saul (Paul) and the two of them taught in Antioch for a while

The conversion of Saul.

The conversion of Saul was a very important event for the early church as he later became "the apostle for the Gentiles". God used Saul (Paul) to bring many Gentiles to Christ and to produce writings that explained how the gospel was for everyone – Jews and Gentiles. These writings now form a major part of the New Testament.

Salvation for the Gentiles.

The salvation of Cornelius and his household was one of the most important events in church history. Up till that time the focus of the disciples had been on sharing the gospel with other Jews. (Under Jewish law the disciples could not associate with Gentiles). Now, after direct revelation of the Holy Spirit, the gospel was to be opened up to Gentiles. Anyone who accepted Jesus Christ could be saved! It took a very powerful and direct revelation from God to Peter to convince him that the Jewish law was not relevant for Christians, but it took a while for other church leaders to accept this.

year. The disciples were first called *Christians* in Antioch. Agabus, a prophet, predicted there would be a famine so the Christians provided help for the brothers living in Judea, each *according to their ability*.

Peter in prison. 12:1-25.

King Herod then began to persecute the church even more intensely. He had James, the brother of John put to death and Peter put in prison. Peter was guarded by four squads of four soldiers and was to be brought to trial after the Passover. *The church was earnestly praying to God for his release and the night before the trial an angel set Peter free and led him out to the street. He went to the John Mark’s mother’s house where the church was praying. When the servant Rhoda told them Peter was at the door they initially didn’t believe it! When they saw him they were astonished and Peter was able to tell them how the Lord had brought him out of prison.* This caused quite a commotion among the soldiers!

Herod was a very proud man and *did not give praise to God*. When then people called him a *god, not a man* the Lord struck him down with worms and he died.

Regardless of Herod or any others who persecuted the *church the word of God continued to increase and spread*. This was significantly helped through the ministry of the Apostle Paul. The next part of Acts describes Paul’s missionary journeys, through which the gospel spread to the Gentiles and throughout the Roman Empire.

Miraculous answers to prayer.
 One very obvious feature of Acts is how the early Christians had many miraculous answers to prayer. Under the leading of the Holy Spirit they prayed with great power and the Lord answered with many signs and wonders and miracles. The supernatural was natural! This still happens today in some parts of the world. For many Christians, though, there is little expectation that God will answer prayer in miraculous ways, and few demonstrations of His power. Perhaps we need another great outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

Paul’s first missionary journey. 13:1-14:28.

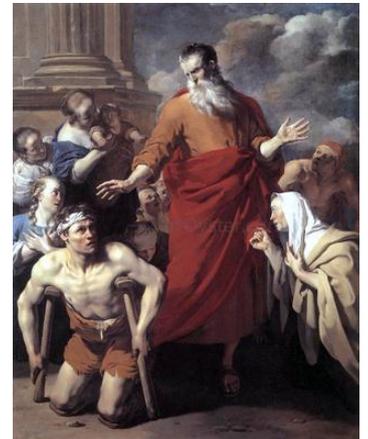
After prayer and fasting Paul and Barnabas were set apart for what has become known as Paul’s first missionary journey. They were *sent on their way by the Holy Spirit*.



In this journey they visited Salamis and Paphos on Cyprus; Perga in Pamphylia; Antioch in Pisidia; Iconium, Lystra and Derbe in Cicilia, and then returned to Antioch in Syria.

Highlights of the first missionary journey were:

- Paul (at this stage still called Saul), Barnabas and John Mark left from Seleucia, (the port of Antioch in Syria), and sailed to Salamis on the island of Cyprus. They *proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues* then travelled to Paphos. There the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, was converted after Paul rebuked the sorcerer Elymas so he became blind.
- From Paphos they sailed north up to Perga in modern day Turkey. There Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem, possibly because he was homesick. Paul preached in the synagogue showing how God had fulfilled what was predicted about Jesus in the Old Testament and *how God raised Him from the dead*, quoting from Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3, Psalm 16:10. Through Jesus *the forgiveness of sins* was being proclaimed. *Through Him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses*. When the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord some Jews became jealous so from then on Paul focused on sharing the gospel with the Gentiles (in fulfilment of Isaiah 49:6). *The word of the Lord spread through the whole region* but some “god-fearing” people stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas so they *shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium*.
- In Iconium, they made many converts among Jews and Gentiles and *the Lord confirmed the message of His grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders*. Again they were persecuted and would have been killed if they hadn't discovered the plot and fled to Lystra and Derbe.
- In Lystra a crippled man was healed and *jumped up and began to walk*. The people thought Paul and Barnabas were gods but they explained they were *just men* bringing them *good news* and telling them *to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them*. Some of the persecutors from Antioch and Iconium incited the crowd and Paul was stoned and dragged out of the city and left for dead. He was raised up and next day left for Derbe. A large number of disciples were won in Derbe then Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, *strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith*. They appointed elders in each church and committed them to the Lord with prayer and fasting before sailing back to Syrian Antioch.
- On arriving back in Antioch they *gathered the church together* and reported *all that God had done through them* and how He had *opened the door of faith to the Gentiles*.



The first missionary journey lasted about 2 years and took place in the years 46 to 48AD.

The Council at Jerusalem. 15:1-35.

Jesus, the disciples, Paul and most of the first Christian converts were Jews. They lived under Judaism where obedience to the Law was central to relationship with God. The most important issue the early church had to face was whether *Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses*. Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to meet the apostles and elders to *consider this question*.

During the 'Council at Jerusalem:

- Peter described how God had saved Gentiles at Cornelius' house and *made no distinction between us and them for He purified their hearts by faith*. To get Gentiles to follow the law would *test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear*. Gentiles were saved in just the same way as they had been - *through the grace of God*.
- Barnabas and Paul told of the *miraculous wonders and signs God had done among the Gentiles*.
- James recognised that God had already said Gentiles could be saved. Amos 9:11,12.
- The judgment was made that they should not make it difficult for *Gentiles who are turning to God*. The only requirements were that they should *abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood*. (These were a few of the requirements of the old law! The disciples couldn't quite free themselves from their old ways!) A letter was written for the Gentile believers stating these requirements.

Judas and Silas were sent off with the letter and those who received it were glad because of its *encouraging message*. Judas and Silas spent time encouraging and strengthening the brothers and Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch where *they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord*.

Later Paul wanted to *go back and visit the places where they had preached the word of the Lord* and see how they were doing. Barnabas wanted to take Mark who had deserted them on the previous trip and Paul and Barnabas had such a *sharp disagreement* that they *parted company*. Paul took Silas with him on the second missionary journey. Apparently Paul, Barnabas and Mark sorted out their relationship later on. See Colossians 4:10, 2 Timothy 4:11.

Christians are under grace, not under law.

The New Testament consistently teaches that Christians are not under any obligation to keep the Jewish law. Rather than living under the law we are to live in the Spirit and this will enable us to be really fruitful for God. Jesus has fulfilled the law so it no longer has any relevance for Christians -including the 10 commandments! Jesus' 'new commandment' is to love the Lord, our neighbours and ourselves, and obey what God says for us to do.

See Romans Chapters 1-11, Mark 12:29-31; John 13:34,35; John 14:15-27; Matthew 5:17-20, 22:37-39; Galatians (whole book), Ephesians 2:14-18, Colossians 2:6-23; Hebrews 10:1-18; James 2:8-13; 1 John 3 etc.

Jesus death on the Cross also put an end to the Old Testament sacrificial system which was part of the law. The sacrifices were imperfect and have now been replaced by Jesus' one perfect sacrifice. See 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Colossians 1:15-23; 1 Peter 1:13-25; Hebrews 1:10-18; 7:23-10:18. These verses show that the new covenant makes the old obsolete.

Paul's second missionary journey. 16:1-18:22

The second missionary journey covered a lot more ground than the first one, visiting Syrian Antioch, Derbe, Lystra, Antioch, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus before returning to Caesarea. This time much of the journey was over land.

Highlights of the second missionary journey were:

- Paul and Silas first travelled through Syria and Cilicia *strengthening the churches*, and they were *strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers*. In Lystra Paul circumcised Timothy, a Greek because he *wanted to take him along on the journey*. Rather hypocritical of Paul to circumcise Timothy when he had just been saying circumcision was not relevant for Christians!
- Next Paul was led by the Holy Spirit through Phrygia and Galatia. He had to remain in Galatia for a while due to illness (Galatians 4:13-14) but then had a vision of a man from Macedonia asking for help. He concluded that God had *called us to preach the gospel to them*. (Luke must have joined the group at this stage, as shown by the words 'we' and 'us').
- In Philippi, Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, was saved and *all the members of her household were baptised*. When Paul commanded an evil spirit to leave a slave girl used for fortune-telling, her owners had Paul and Silas thrown into prison. At midnight Paul and Silas were *praying and singing hymns to God* when there was an earthquake and the prisoners were set free. The jailer wanted to get saved and Paul told him to *believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household*. That night the jailer and his family were baptised. Next day the magistrate released Paul and Silas and ordered them to leave the town, not realising they were Roman citizens.
- In Thessalonica Paul went to the Jewish synagogue and *reasoned with them from the Scriptures explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead*. Some Jews and a large number of Greeks believed, but other Jews got jealous and started a riot because Paul and Silas were saying that *there is another king, one called Jesus*. Jason was arrested for welcoming them to his house, but Paul and Silas escaped that night.
- In Berea the Jews in the synagogue *received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true* and many became believers. The Jews from Thessalonica came and agitated so Paul was sent to Athens and Silas and Timothy joined him later.
- In Athens *Paul was distressed to see the city was full of idols*. He preached on the Areopagus explaining that the Lord is not what they worshiped as an *unknown god*. Rather, He is the Creator who controls everything. *In Him we live and move and have our being*. In the past God overlooked mankind's ignorance but now He *commands*



all people everywhere to repent. He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the Man (Jesus) He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead.

- In Corinth Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla earning his keep as a tent-maker. Initially he *taught the Jews that Jesus was the Christ*, but when they opposed him and became abusive he focused on the Gentiles. He stayed in Corinth for a year and a half *teaching them the word of God*. The Jews brought him before Gallio the proconsul but he was found to be innocent of any wrong-doing. Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians while he was in Corinth – the first two of his many pastoral letters.
- Paul then began his homeward journey accompanied by Aquila and Priscilla as far as Ephesus. He was there for only a short time and promised to *come back if it is God's will*. From Ephesus Paul made his way by sea back to Syrian Antioch.

The second missionary journey lasted about 3 years and took place in the years 49 to 52AD.

Paul's third missionary journey. 18:23-21:26.

The third missionary journey retraced much of the ground covered in the second, visiting Syrian Antioch, Derbe, Lystra, Antioch, Ephesus, Pergamum, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth, before returning via Ephesus and ending up in Jerusalem. The focus this time was less on church planting and more on strengthening the faith of the new believers. Again, much of the journey was over land.

Highlights of the third missionary journey were:

- Paul and Timothy revisited the churches in Galatia and Phrygia, on their way to Ephesus. Meanwhile a Jewish believer called Apollos came to Ephesus and received teaching from Priscilla and Aquila so he understood *the way of God more adequately*.
- In Ephesus Paul found some disciples *who had not received the Holy Spirit when they believed*. They had just been baptised by John for repentance. They were *baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus* and when Paul laid hands on them, *the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied*.
- Paul preached boldly in the synagogue in Ephesus for three months *arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God*. When he met resistance he preached more widely so that after two and a half years in Ephesus *all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord*. Wow! What an achievement!
- *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul* so people were healed and delivered from evil spirits when his handkerchiefs touched them. Some Jews tried to copy Paul by *invoking the name of Jesus over those who were demon-possessed*. The demons replied by saying *"Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?"* Through this, great fear came upon Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus and many who had practised sorcery repented and burned their scrolls. *The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power*.
- There was a riot when Demetrius, a silversmith who made idols objected when Paul said *man-made gods are no gods at all*. He was losing trade and worked up the crowd by saying the goddess Artemis was being discredited. *The whole city was in an uproar* and Paul wanted to speak to the crowd but his friends wouldn't let him. The city clerk quietened the crowd by reinforcing their beliefs and saying that if they had a grievance against Paul they should press charges through the courts.
- Paul travelled throughout Macedonia speaking *many words of encouragement* and then went to Greece where he stayed for three months until the Jews again plotted to kill him.
- Paul then began to retrace his steps and reached Troas where he raised Eutychus from the dead. Eutychus had fallen asleep while Paul was preaching and fallen out of the window!
- Paul decided not to go back to Ephesus so he could reach Jerusalem before Pentecost. He met with the elders before he left and reviewed the time spent in Ephesus with them. He had *served the Lord with great humility and with tears*, even though he had been greatly persecuted. He had declared to both Jews and Greeks *that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus*. He now wanted to finish the task God had given him – *the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace*. He was innocent of their blood because he had *not hesitated to proclaim the whole will of God to them*. What a great way to finish a ministry!
- Timothy must have been appointed as the leader of the church in Ephesus at this point, even though he was relatively young. Paul's letters to him in 1 and 2 Timothy show how Paul continued to mentor



Timothy as he carried out the challenging task of leading the church in a Roman city of some 250,000 people. See 1 and 2 Timothy, and the letter to the Ephesians.

- Paul then gave some final counsel to the elders in Ephesus. They were to be *good shepherds* and *keep watch* over themselves and over the flock which the Holy Spirit had led them to oversee. They were to *be on guard* because many would try to *distort the truth*. Paul committed them to God and the *word of His grace* and reminded them how he had served them so selflessly. They were to *help the weak* because it is *more blessed to give than to receive*. After praying for them and farewelling them with tears Paul sailed past Cyprus to Tyre.
- In Tyre some disciples recognised the danger and urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem and in Caesarea Agabus prophesied that he would be handed over to the Gentile authorities. Paul said he was *ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus* and they prayed that the Lord's will would be done.
- In Jerusalem Paul was *received warmly* and reported to the church leaders *what God had done among the Gentiles*. Paul again compromised his position when the leaders explained that many Jewish believers had been told that he urged the Gentiles to *turn away from Moses* and not circumcise children or live according to the customs. He was told to purify himself in the old way so the Jewish believers would see that he was *living in obedience to the law*, and he did so. (Later on when he wrote the letter to the Romans Paul gave a strong repudiation of the need for the Christians to comply in any way with the Jewish law, as he expounded the gospel of grace. The central message of Romans is that Jesus fulfilled the law with all of its demands and brought in a new way – the way of grace. Salvation is now by grace through faith, not by the carrying out of any religious works or fulfilling any kind of laws).

The gospel of grace.

Paul preached the gospel (good news) of grace.

This gospel was:

- foreshadowed in the Old Testament
- introduced through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- explained by the apostle Paul.

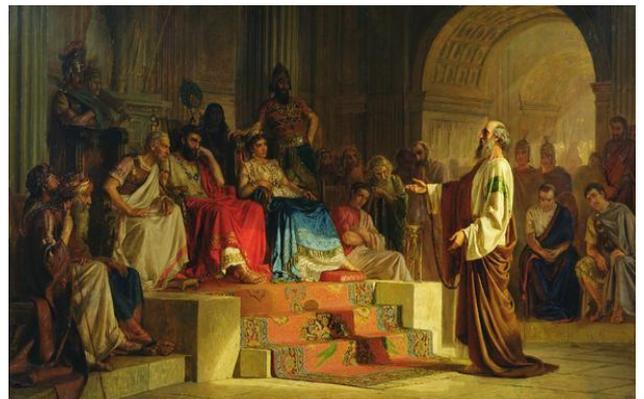
God loves us and, in Christ, has done everything necessary to procure our salvation. To experience God's grace all we have to do is put our faith in Jesus Christ. That's amazing grace!

Paul's third missionary journey took about 4 years and took place between the years 53-57 A.D.

Paul's arrest and trial. 21:27-26:32

In Jerusalem some Jews from Asia stirred up a crowd and tried to kill him. *The whole city was aroused*. He Roman commander rescued Paul and he was allowed to speak to the crowd. He explained that he was a Jew and was *thoroughly trained in the law* but the Lord Jesus had appeared to him, saved him and called him to share the gospel with the Gentiles. The crowd erupted at this and Paul was taken to prison and was about to be flogged when he explained that he was born a Roman citizen. The commander was alarmed that he had put Paul in chains and ordered that he be brought before the Sanhedrin.

Paul stated that he was a Pharisee and that he was on trial because of his hope in the *resurrection of the dead*. A dispute broke out between the Pharisees who believe in the resurrection and the Sadducees who don't. The commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces and ordered he be put in the barracks. That night the Lord encouraged Paul saying *'Take courage. As you have testified about Me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome'*. Next morning some Jews took an oath to kill Paul but it got reported to the commander. Paul was sent under guard to Governor Felix in Caesarea. The commander wrote a letter explaining what had happened and stating that there was *no charge* against Paul that deserved death or punishment. Paul was kept under guard in Herod's palace till his accusers arrived from Jerusalem.



In his trial before Felix Paul was accused of being a troublemaker but in his defense explained that none of the charges made against him could be proved. He admitted to being a *worshipper of God*; a *follower of the Way*, and a believer in the *resurrection*, and that he always tried to keep a *clear conscience* before God and man. He was on trial for his *faith in Christ Jesus* and then shared with Felix about *righteousness, self control and the*

judgment to come. Felix left Paul in prison hoping for a bribe, but often came and talked with him. After two years Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus who left Paul in prison as a favour to the Jews.

Some Jewish leaders tried to get Festus to send Paul to Jerusalem, planning to ambush and kill him on the way. Paul was brought before Festus in Caesarea and again the charges against him could not be proved. When Festus offered to try him in Jerusalem Paul said he had done nothing deserving death and that no-one had the right to hand him over to the Jews. He appealed to Caesar. Festus consulted with King Agrippa, who said he would like to hear Paul. Next day Paul was brought before Agrippa and, again, no charges could be brought against him. Paul explained to Agrippa how he had grown up and lived as a Pharisee and was now on trial because he believed in the resurrection of the dead. He explained how Jesus had appeared to him and sent him to the Gentiles *to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified in Christ.* He was acting in obedience to this in proclaiming that *the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to His own people and to the Gentiles.* Festus thought Paul was insane and Agrippa who knew about such things felt Paul was trying to persuade him to become a Christian. He determined that Paul had *not done anything that deserves death or punishment* and could have been set free *if he had not appealed to Caesar.*

Paul sent to Rome. 27:1-28:16

Paul and other prisoners were sent from Caesarea to Rome, travelling via Sidon, Asia, Cyprus, Crete and Malta. As they passed Crete Paul prophesied that the voyage was *going to be disastrous* but this was ignored by the centurion guarding him. The ship was caught in a storm and the cargo had to be thrown overboard. An angel told Paul that the ship would be lost but no-one would die. Paul had faith in God that it would happen *just as He said.* After fourteen days the ship was foundering and Paul urged everyone to eat. The ship broke to pieces but *everyone reached land in safety.* On shore they found that they had landed on Malta. Paul was gathering firewood and was bitten by a viper. He shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The local people thought he was a god and invited him to pray for the sick and *the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured.*



Paul imprisoned in Rome. 28:17-31

After three months they set sail and arrived in Rome. Paul met with some of the Christians and Paul *thanked God and was encouraged.* He was allowed to *live by himself* under house arrest with just a soldier to guard him. Three days later he called the the leaders of the Jews together and explained why he had been arrested and sent to Rome. From *morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God, and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and the Prophets.* Only some were convinced and Paul rebuked them, quoting from Isaiah 6:9,10. He said that God's salvation had now been *sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen.* Paul stayed in Rome for two years awaiting his trial. *Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God, and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.*

The letters to the Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, and Philippians and 2 Timothy were probably written while Paul was under house arrest in Rome. We don't know how or when Paul died, but tradition states that he was martyred under Emperor Nero. This may have taken place by beheading in the late 60s AD, at the Three Fountains Abbey in Rome. After Jesus, Paul was one of the most influential men in history.

Discussion questions

Why is Acts sometimes called "the acts of the Apostles", and sometimes called "the acts of the Holy Spirit"?

Describe how each of the following people contributed to the spread of the gospel: Peter, Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, Paul, Luke, Timothy. What can you learn from each of these early Christians?

Describe how the early Christian church operated. What did they do when they met together? What was important to them? What did they spend their time on? How were they supported? What was their central message? What can we learn from the way they operated? Should we copy the way that they operated?

Trace the spread of the gospel as described in Acts. Consider how it spread geographically and how it spread to different people groups. What factors helped the spread of the gospel? What factors hindered the spread of the gospel? How is this relevant for the ways we do evangelism today?

What have you learned from your study of Acts? How will you apply this in your life?