

A Brief New Testament Survey of The Book of Acts A Chronology of the Development of the Early Church

Jesus was born around 4 B.C. The exact year cannot be verified. He died about 33 years later. The Book of Acts begins about 50 days after His resurrection. It starts with the ascension of Jesus and the coming of the “Promise” (the Holy Spirit), at Pentecost. It then chronicles the next 28 years of the growth and development of the early church and the spread of the Gospel. It follows the lives of the apostles and the missionary journeys of Paul. Acts concludes with his house arrest in Rome around 58 A.D. The book of Acts will help us to understand the time-line of the majority of the New Testament. We will see when and where the Epistles were written and the circumstances surrounding the Apostles and others as they take the Gospel “*to the end of the earth.*” (Acts 12:8)

Acts - Chapters 1-2¹

The beginning two chapters of Acts tell a cohesive story of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1:4-5, 8

“And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” He said, “you have heard from Me; {5} for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now... {8} But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.””

Acts 1:12 tells us that after Jesus had ascended the apostles returned to Jerusalem, which was “*a Sabbath day’s journey.*” This was determined by how far the O.T. Law allowed you to walk on the Sabbath (about 2000 paces, or a quarter of a mile). Then the apostles went to the upper room and waited for the Promise (the Holy Spirit.)

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scriptures are taken from the NKJV.

Acts 2:1-4 tells us the apostles were together on the Day of Pentecost and were filled with the Holy Spirit. Then the work began. Believers went house to house and *“the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”* Verses 46-47 tell us that the first believers continued daily in the temple. (They did not abandon the practice.) God began to add new believers to the church.

Acts - Chapters 3-5

Peter and John preached the Gospel boldly. People were healed, saved and filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter healed the man lame from birth. Peter preached a sermon and the Word tells us the men who believed came to be about 5000. The Sadducees, who were very unhappy with him for preaching about Jesus and the resurrection, took him and John into custody. They were commanded not to speak or teach about Jesus and then released. The apostles prayed for boldness to speak the Word of God. There was great unity in the church. The people of the church sold their land and houses and brought the proceeds to the church to be distributed as needed. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit and died. Multitudes were coming to the Lord. The Sadducees put the apostles in prison, but an angel opened the prison doors and set them free to go preach in the temple again. The growth of the church had begun and would never be stopped.

Acts - Chapters 6-7

Deacons were appointed. Stephen was chosen as one of them. The Bible tells us that Stephen was not passive. He approached his calling with great zeal, faith and power. He is an example to all believers. He fit the requirements for a deacon in the church. (See Acts 6:3)

Acts 6:8

“And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.”

Acts 9-15 tells us that Stephen was seized and brought before the high priest. (We have no definitive answer to what the “Synagogue of the Freedmen” was). In Acts 7:1-53, Stephen witnessed to his accusers. Then Stephen said something that put them over the edge.

Acts 7:55-56

"But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, {56} and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!""

They, ran at him, cast him out of the city and stoned him to death. (Acts 7:57-60). Verse 58 has an interesting piece of information. It says that there was a “young” man (The Greek word means someone up to 40 years old.) who guarded the clothes of the “witnesses” to the stoning of Steven. His name was Saul. The “witnesses” were the people who knocked down the accused and threw the first stones.² (They were active participants!)

Acts - Chapter 8

Verse 1 has some very important church growth information in it. It says “*a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*” The death of Stephen resulted in the church being “scattered” throughout Judea and Samaria. This was exactly where Jesus told them to start being witnesses to Him. These would be very different than the witnesses Stephen encountered. These people who were scattered became “involuntary” missionaries. Peter Wagner’s book “Perspectives on the World Christian Movement” book talks about the following four types of missions:

1. Voluntary going:

Paul chose to go to non-Christian environments. Most missionaries today choose to go on the field. We were voluntary missionaries.

² Expositor’s Commentary – Zondervan’s Reference Software.

2. Involuntary going:

This occurs when we are forced to leave where we are and go to a non-Christian environment. This is what occurred when persecution came to the early church. They scattered involuntarily. How does this still occur today?

3. Voluntary coming:

This occurs when people immigrate or visit, who are from non-Christian environments and are exposed to Christian environments.) International students and business people coming to America may be examples of this.

Involuntary coming:

Examples are slaves or refugees, who are forced to relocate and encounter the Gospel where they begin their new lives.

Acts 8:3-4 tells us that the Gospel moves forward with or without our consent. Saul was trying to destroy the church. He was even going into people's homes and dragging them off to prison. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem and many believers were scattered.

Acts - Chapter 9: Saul Encounters Jesus
(Sometime between 32 and 37 A.D.)

Acts 9:3-6

"As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. {4} Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" {5} And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." {6} So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.""

"Lord, what do you want me to do?"

Those eight words forever changed the life of Saul, and radically affected the spread of the Gospel. His obedience resulted in the creation of 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament, (about 30 % of the text). He immediately began his bondservice to Christ

(Verse 20). This also began the death threats and attempts to kill him by his enemies (Verse 23). An example of Paul's testimony of one of these is found in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33. He had many escapes from these attempts.

Paul actually stayed in the Arabia/Damascus area for three years (Galatians 1:17). He also spent about thirteen years in the desert preparing himself. (We do not have details of this.)

When Paul first went to Jerusalem as a Christian, the disciples were afraid of him. They only knew him as Saul the persecutor; and, did not believe he was really a disciple of Jesus (Verse 26). Verse 27 tells us that Paul did meet with Barnabus. If we go to Galatians we see he also met with Peter and James (Galatians 1:18-19).

Again, Paul's life was in danger, as the Hellenists tried to kill him (Acts 9:29). These were Jewish people who were influenced by the Greek culture. Acts 9:30-31 tells us that Paul escaped and went to Tarsus (about 375 miles north from Jerusalem - about the same distance from Miami to Jacksonville.) The church multiplied. He continued to travel and evangelize. Much of the details of Paul's bondservice is not recorded in the Book of Acts. We can fill in many of these details from his epistles. For example:

Galatians 1:21-22

*"Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. {22}
And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which
were in Christ."*

End of Acts 9, Acts Chapters 10-11

Acts 9:32-11:18, The Apostle Peter, in the meantime, continued to preach, heal the sick and raise the dead. God sent him to the Gentiles; and, they were saved and filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-48).

Acts 10:45-46

*"And those of the circumcision who believed were
astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of*

the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. {46} For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.”

Peter explained to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem what happened. They were upset with him. But when he told them what happened, Acts 11:18 reports that *“When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”* Remember the involuntary missionaries that were “scattered”? The next three verses say this:

{19} “Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. {20} But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. {21} And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.”

Antioch

You will notice two “Antiochs” on your map handout. One in Syria and one is in Turkey. They were both founded by a general, Seleucus Nicator under Alexander the Great (3rd century B.C.). He named these two cities and 14 other after his father. He also named several cities Laodicea in honor of his mother.³ In New Testament times, Antioch in Syria was said to have been the third most important city in the Roman Empire. Tradition says that Peter started the church there.

- At the end of Acts, Chapter 11 Barnabas went to Tarsus looking for Paul and brought him back to Antioch. They taught together there for two years.
- The disciples were first called “Christians” at Antioch in Syria.
- One of the first deacons of the church was a proselyte from Antioch, Nicolas (Acts 6:5).
- It was the place that Paul confronted Peter for being hypocritical about eating with the Gentiles (Galatians 2:11). Paul started all three of his missionary journeys from here.

³ www.livius.org.

Acts - Chapter 12

In 44 A.D. Herod killed James, and imprisoned Peter, who was miraculously released from jail by an angel. Herod tried to take God's glory. He was struck by an angel, eaten by worms and died (Acts 12:20-23).

Paul's Three Missionary Journeys

Acts - Chapters 13-14

The First Missionary Journey Begins.

Acts 13:1-3

*"Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. {2} As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, **the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."** {3} Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away."*

This was the beginning of Paul's First Missionary Journey, which began sometime in 46-48 A.D. (The dates are not exact. It could have been 44-46 or 45-47). They covered about 1400 miles.⁴ Paul, Barnabus and John Mark sailed to Cyprus, and then went to Antioch in Pisidia. Paul preached; and as this pattern continued, the Jews rejected him and the Gentiles embraced him. Then they were thrown out of the region. (Acts 13:50-52). They continued on their journey, speaking boldly in spite of the persecution. Signs and wonders followed their preaching. Acts 14:1-6 tells us that when this happened, they shook the dust off and went to Iconium. There they preached, performed sign and wonders and almost got stoned to death. Then, they fled to Lystra and Derbe where a man crippled from birth was healed (Acts 14:7-18). This caused the people to think that Paul and Barnabas were gods and wanted to worship them. (Acts 14:11)

⁴ Hungry for God's Word website.

Acts 14:19 tells us that the people from Iconium and Antioch had followed them to Lystra (about 20 miles). They stoned Paul, dragged him out of the city and left him for dead. The disciples gathered around him, and the next day he got up and headed out to preach again! Then they returned to the cities that had tried to kill him! Finally, they ended up back in Antioch (in Syria) where they had started. The Word tells us they stayed there “*a long time*” (Acts 14:26-28).

Acts - Chapter 15: The Jerusalem Council

A big debate in Antioch arose about Gentile converts keeping the Law (Acts 14:25-28). Paul and Barnabus went to the apostles and elders in the church in Jerusalem to straighten it all out. This may have been around 49 A.D.⁵ This is called the Jerusalem Council. James, the brother of Jesus proposed that the Gentiles should not be troubled to keep the Law, but that they just be required to abstain from eating food offered to idols, sexual immorality and do not eat things strangled or blood. This relieved the Gentiles from the necessity of being circumcised under the Law, but still required that they do certain things so that there could be fellowship between them and the Jewish believers when it came to social issues.⁶ Then, Paul and Barnabus went back to Antioch with the good news.

Acts 15:36-41 tells us that problems arose between Paul and Barnabus, concerning taking Barnabus' cousin, John Mark with them on their next missionary journey. Paul did not want him to come because he had left them the first time (Acts 13:13). Paul and Barnabus ended up parting ways; and, Barnabus and John Mark sailed to Cyprus. Paul chose to take Silas⁷ with him to strengthen the churches that had been planted (Acts 15:40-41).

⁵ Zondervan.

⁶ The book of James it thought to have been written before this time, as there is no mention of Gentile believers or the issues of the Council of Jerusalem in James. Some think the Book of James was the earliest writing of the New Testament.

⁷ Luke when writing used the name Silas, the Greek translation of his Hebrew name. Paul called him by his Roman name - Silvanus (2 Cor 1:19; 2 Thess 1:1). Ref. Zondervan. Saul also was known by two names. Saul was his Hebrew name and Paul was his Roman name.

The Second Missionary Journey Begins.

Paul and Silas depart on the Second Missionary Journey. (A.D. 49-52? 51-54?). This journey covered about 2800 miles.⁸

Acts - Chapters 16-17

They headed north back to Derbe and Lystra where Paul had been stoned. That is where Paul met Timothy, circumcised him and he began to travel with them. Acts 16:9-10 tells us that Paul had a vision, in which the Lord called them to preach in Macedonia, which was in the northern part of Greece. The Gospel was now going to the ends of the earth. Philippi was the first European place that the Gospel was preached and converts were made. In Acts 16:14-34 Lydia and the Philippian jailer and his family became believers.

Paul, Silas and Timothy then headed for Thessalonica where Paul preached for three weeks in the synagogue. They ended up leaving there in the middle of the night because of the mobs coming after them. Berea was the next stop. Many became believers, including some Greeks. Just as on his first trip, when the mobs followed him from Iconium, the mobs from Thessalonica followed him to Berea. The Bereans sent Paul away for his safety. Timothy and Silas remained there. Paul went south to Athens where he preached. Some mocked, some believed.

Acts - Chapters 18-19

Acts 18:1-6 tells us that Paul traveled west to Corinth (about 225 miles from Philippi) where he met Aquila and Priscilla. They were Jews who had been banished from Rome by Emperor Claudius in 49 A.D. They were tentmakers like Paul. He stayed and worked with them. Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Corinth. When Paul's preaching was rejected by the Jews, he determined that from then on, he would go to the Gentiles.

Crispus was saved (Acts 18:8); and, was one of the few people Paul mentioned that he personally baptized (1 Corinthians 1:14-

⁸ Hungry Word website.

16). Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth where he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The journey continued as Paul, Priscilla and Aquila went to Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19). Paul left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus and returned to Antioch in Syria (Acts 18:22).

The Third Missionary Journey Begins. (Acts 18:23)

Paul began his Third Missionary Journey in A.D. 53-57 or 54-58. We do not know the date for sure. It covered about 2700 miles.⁹ The Scripture tells us that Priscilla and Aquila met Apollos in Ephesus (Acts 18:24-28). Apollos knew the Scriptures, but had limited knowledge of the Gospel. They explained the fullness of the Gospel to him.

Acts - Chapters 19-21

Paul stopped back in Ephesus and spent three years there (Acts 20:31). God did “*unusual*” miracles and people were healed and delivered (Acts 19:11-12). This was also where the seven sons of Sceva tried to use the name of Jesus to cast out an evil spirit; and, it did not go well with them (Acts 19:13-16). Paul also wrote 1 Corinthians while there (1 Corinthians 16:8). Paul departed for Macedonia. He wrote the 2nd letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 8:1, 16-24). Then, he traveled the region encouraging the believers and then went south to Greece where he stayed 3 months. The Jews again plotted to kill him and he headed out. Paul stopped at Philippi, sailed to Troas, and went back to Jerusalem.

Acts Chapters 21:17-26:28

Paul gave a great report to James and the elders in Jerusalem about all that the Lord has done among the Gentiles. They gave glory to God, and then warned Paul that some of the religious Jews who were believers were angry. This was because they heard that Paul was teaching the Jews that they did not have to obey the Law of Moses. Paul performed the religious rites required so they would see that he still followed the Law.

⁹ Hungry Word website.

However, when the Jewish believers saw Paul in the Temple, they dragged him out and started beating him to death. The commander of the garrison there sent soldiers and centurions to save Paul and he was taken into custody (Acts 21:30-32). As he was being taken away Paul said basically, *“Wait a minute, could I say a few words?”* He preached to the crowd and gave his testimony of who he used to be, and that he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Then he told them that the Lord sent him to the Gentiles. The crowd went wild and called for his death (Acts 22:21-23). The Romans were about to scourge him but Paul told them he was a Roman citizen, so they left him alone (Acts 22:25-29).

The next day he was brought before the High Priest Ananias. A plot was set to kill Paul (Acts 23:20-22). The commander of the centurions took Paul by night and brought him to Governor Felix in Caesarea where Paul spends 2 years in jail (Acts 24:27). Again, the high priest tried to set up an ambush to kill Paul (Acts 25:1-4). Paul appealed to Festus to be sent to Caesar in Rome instead of back to Jerusalem.

Paul was then tried before King Agrippa (Acts 25:22). Again, Paul seized the opportunity to tell his whole testimony to Agrippa (Acts 26:1-23). Agrippa told Paul that he almost persuaded him to be a Christian (Acts 26:28). King Agrippa told Paul that if he hadn't appealed to Caesar he would have set him free (Verse 32). However, the Holy Spirit had an assignment for Paul in Rome.

Acts Chapters 27:1-28:31

Paul was put on a ship headed for Rome. He was shipwrecked and ended up on the island of Malta, near Sicily (Acts 28:1). Paul continued to minister in power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit. 3 months later (Acts 28:11), they sailed on to Rome.

Paul called for the leaders of the Jews in Rome to come see him. They did not know anything about what had happened in Jerusalem, so they agreed to meet with Paul. He testified to them about the Kingdom of God (Acts 28:23-29). Some believed and some did not. Paul quoted Isaiah 6:9-10; and, declared that the

salvation of God had been sent “to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!” (Acts 28:28). (It is notable to see that Paul did not quote Isaiah 6:8. His life was a prophetic fulfillment of this verse, but Paul’s focus was never on himself. Then, he spent 2 years in a rented house under house arrest; and, continued to preach the Kingdom of God. The Book of Acts concludes at this point (Acts 28:30-31).

After the Book of Acts

While a prisoner in Rome, Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. They are called the “Prison Epistles.” History records this as happening around 60-62 A.D. Paul reportedly was released from prison in 63 A.D. There is no record of exactly when and where he went. During this time, he wrote two of the Pastoral Epistles: Titus and First Timothy.

Christianity had been outlawed in the Roman Empire by Nero who blamed the burning of Rome in 64 A.D. on the Christians. Most believe that Nero himself was probably the cause of the fire. It is thought that Peter wrote his epistles during this time before he was martyred in Rome. Jude was probably based on 2 Peter and written some time after it. Paul was imprisoned again in 67 A.D. This time he was not under house arrest, but in a cold Roman prison cell. His final epistle Second Timothy was written from prison. He was martyred about 67 A.D.

John’s books, other than the Gospel of John, were the last written in the New Testament. (1, 2, 3 John (85-90 A.D.) and Revelation (95-96 A.D.)) Note how the Epistles dovetail with the Book of Acts. It all fits together perfectly, as only the Word of God can do.