

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

LESSON SERIES

UNIT III
THE BOOK OF ACTS

for

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UNIT III - NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY HISTORICAL

THE BOOK OF ACTS

The Book of Acts is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, and continues the early history of Christianity. The book begins by referring to "the former treatise" and is addressed to the same person to whom the other work is addressed, Theophilus.

Although the Book of Acts as it stands is anonymous, like the Gospel of Luke, the name was associated with both at the early date, and this uninterrupted tradition of authorship is universally accepted today. The internal evidence points in the direction of Luke as its author. Certain passages (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; chapters 27 and 28) are written in the firstperson plural, and are called the "we-sections," as indicating that the author was present and an eye-witness of the events which he records. The "we-sections", also, correspond to Luke's presence as Paul's companion and associate at the city of Troas, and on Paul's other journeys.

The most natural date to assign to the composition of the Book of Acts is about the close of the Apostle Paul's Roman imprisonment. Paul and Luke, and the remainder of the party, arrived at Rome early in 61 A.D. Luke closes his narrative with the statement of the "two whole years" of that first imprisonment (28:30-31). This would place the date of the book at about 63 A.D. and not later, as Luke does not mention some of the momentous events of 64 A.D. to 70 AD., such as, Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD., followed by the persecution of Christians; the Jewish Rebellion against Rome which began in 66 A.D. and culminated in the destruction of the Temple and all Jerusalem by the Romans, under their commander Titus, in 70 A.D.

Also, from tradition as well as from Paul's later letters, it is generally supposed that Paul was tried before the Emperor Nero, and acquitted, about 63 A.D., not long after the writing of the Book of Acts.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

Luke's purpose in writing the book of Acts is the same as his purpose in writing the former book, the Gospel of Luke. His introduction to the Gospel may very well be his introduction, also, to the Book of Acts. In the first book, Luke purpose as stated in the introduction was to write a complete and orderly account of the Gospel story as revealed in the life and ministry of our Lord.

Connecting the two works, Luke begins his second book with this significant remark:

"The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up. . ." (Acts 1:1,2).

The phrase, "all that Jesus began both to do and teach," implies that the Lord Jesus is continuing His work, after the Ascension, and Luke's second book is to continue that story through the "ACTS" of the Apostles.

Luke's purpose is further evident when he quotes the Lord's Great Command before His departure, in these words:

"and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

These words, also, may be taken as the key to the Book of Acts. For it is precisely the story of these witnesses, in the three respective areas mentioned, with which the Book of Acts deals

Luke's further purpose is revealed in his interpretation of the early history of the Christian movement. Just as Mark was the companion and interpreter of the Apostle Peter, and a disciple of Peter's preaching and approach to the Gospel story; so was Luke a disciple of the Apostle Paul and presents the universality of the Gospel, and the all-sufficiency of Christ as Savior. Other Jewish Christians might hold to circumcision and the observance of the Jewish ceremonial law, but not them.

So Luke's main mission and purpose, both as a follower and a historian, was to tell the story of the growth and expansion of the early Christian Church, from "a Jewish sect into a world-wide religion." The Book of Acts, therefore, is of the greatest value to the present day reader, because it is the only authentic record which we have of the first thirty years of the history of the Christian Church.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

In the composition of the Book of Acts, Luke shows himself the true historian. On every hand there is evidence of painstaking effort to secure the true facts, and to organize and to report them. As Luke said in the introduction to the Gospel of Luke, he undertook to trace the course of all things accurately from the very first.

One of the characteristics of the work of Luke is that it has stood the test of time for historical accuracy. Luke sets his history in the framework of contemporary imperial events. Luke's pages are full of the names of Roman officials, governors, including their correct official titles. He even mentions a Roman Emperor 5 name [No other New Testament writes does so.] Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect to its trustworthiness.

Luke's plan for the composition of Acts, as we can readily see, is to group his narrative around a central figure, such as the Apostle Peter in chapters 1 to 12, and the Apostle Paul in chapters 13 to 28. In smaller units, Luke has followed the same method. For instance, he singles out some one person, such as Stephen, Philip and the Ethiopian, Cornelius, the young man Timothy, his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois and develops the story around them.

Another feature of the Book of Acts is the number of speeches which He reproduces.

- The first is Peter's great sermon on the Day of Pentecost, 2:14-41;
- Stephen's defense of himself, 7:2-53;

- Paul's speech before the Areopagus Forum, Athens, 17,22-31. Paul delivered at least five speeches while under arrest or in prison, at Jerusalem and Caesarea, 21:37 to 26:29.

Luke records others, some of which are summarized briefly, while others are given at more length.

BUT THE LARGER PLAN OF THE BOOK OF ACTS, is to tell the story of the expansion of the early Christian Church into a world-wide religion, from the viewpoint of the three areas named in the commission of our risen Lord: in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Thus to analyze the Book of Acts we will group the contents into three divisions:

1. The Church in Jerusalem, Chapters 1 - 7.
[The Lord Jesus Christ at work by the Holy Spirit through the Apostles in Jerusalem.]
1. The Church in Judea and Samaria, Chapters 8 - 11:18.
[The Lord Jesus Christ at work by the Holy Spirit through the Apostles in Judea and Samaria.]
1. The Church beyond Palestine, Chapters 11:19 - 28.
[The Lord Jesus Christ at work by the Holy Spirit through the Apostles to the **UTTERMOST** part of the earth.]

THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM, CHAPTERS, 1 - 7.

INTRODUCTION

"Theophilus" is one of the unknown disciples in the early church whose name means "lover of God" or "loved of God." Luke's primary object is to show that Jesus continued His work and ministry after His resurrection but from a different position. (Acts 2:33).

FROM THE RESURRECTION TO PENTECOST

From the resurrection of our Lord Jesus until the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was a time period of 50 day. Those fifty days are divided into 40 and 10 - the 40 days of the Lord's post-Resurrection ministry, and the 10 days of "tarrying" between the ascension of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

During this 40 day period of time, the risen Lord was instructing the apostles "of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (1:3). He was teaching them from the Scriptures, which was His custom (Luke 24:27,32,44-45). However, there was one point concerning the kingdom of God which was not touched, or maybe, the apostles did not want to understand or accept, and that was the **TIME** when He would restore the kingdom to Israel; hence the question the apostles asked in verse 6. The answer Jesus gave them was according to His repeated teaching; the **TIME** was God's secret (Matthew 24:36,42,44; 25:13)

During this 40 day period Jesus ,also, gave anew the promise of the Father, to send His Holy Spirit, for power and guidance and charged the disciples with the Great

Commission to be witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

During the time of "tarrying" we see the Apostles with other of the disciples (about one hundred and twenty in all) continuing "with one accord in prayer and supplication." Also, during this time, after asking for God's guidance in their choice, they named Matthias as the twelfth apostle to take the place of Judas, the traitor who destroyed himself. Since the foundation of the Church was being laid, it was necessary thus to complete their number. Unfortunately we have no further information about Matthias.

THE OUT-POURING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

With the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost we have the beginning of the Church. They had no building or church house; but as a community of Christians (although they were not yet called Christians) they met daily in various homes to break bread, or met publicly in Solomon's portico of the Temple. 3000 was added to the group that first day (2:41), with God adding to the church daily (2:47) and another 5000 added a short time later (4:4).

The healing of the lame man (3:1-9) by Peter was typical of the multitude of "signs and wonders done by the Apostles" (5:12) and further evidence of the power of the Spirit. This miracle caused the arrest of Peter and John by the Sadducees, the leading faction of the Jewish priesthood.

In chapter six as the infant church continued to grow and the burden of the increased responsibilities came upon the Apostles, we see the church being organized, somewhat, to meet the increased needs with the appointment of seven deacons (though Luke does not use the term deacons), to take over the task of distributing food and other necessities to the poor of the Christian community. Stephen, "a man full of faith, and of the Holy Spirit," was named first of the seven deacons.

THE MARTYRDOM OF STEPHEN

Stephen because he was doing great wonders and miracles among the people was arrested and brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin, where on trial for his life, facing his judges, he delivered a soul-searching sermon in defense of himself. A sermon which he closed with a denunciation of the Jewish council (7:51-53).

As a result of his sermon before the Sanhedrin, he was seized by them, carried outside the city, and stoned to death (7:54-60). The witnesses of the stoning left their garments in the care of a young Jew by the name of Saul.

This dramatic incident was the signal for the wholesale persecution of the Christians of the Jerusalem Church. The details of which are not related by Luke. Following the stoning of Stephen, large numbers of believers in Jerusalem were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, and beyond the borders of Palestine as far as Antioch in Syria. However, the Apostles remained in Jerusalem.

**THE CHURCH IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA,
CHAPTERS 8 - 11:19****THE SCATTERING OF THE CHURCH**

Thus, the martyrdom of Stephen precipitated the first outward movement of evangelism from the Jewish capital. In chapter 8 verse 1 we are told *that* consequent upon the persecution which arose around Stephen, "they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." In verse 4 we read: "They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. In verse 5: "Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them." In verse 25, "And they [Peter and John], when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem, and preached the Gospel in many villages of the Samaritians." Still further, in verse 40 we have it that "Philip, passing through [from Azotus] , preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea."

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus in probably the most important event in this second stage of the history of the early Church community. Indeed, except for the mission of our Lord, and the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the conversion of Saul is the most important event related in the New Testament. (9:1-30).

After the conversion of Saul, there was peace in Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and the Church multiplied and prospered, "walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit" (9:31).

As we have seen, Luke's method of telling the story of the early Church is to single out some individual's striking story to represent the whole. Here in chapter 10, Luke makes a special point of telling the story of the conversion of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, through the efforts of Peter, who was in Joppa on an evangelism campaign.

Thus far, the Gospel had been preached to Jews only. Now the time had come to take it also to the Gentiles. The conversion of Cornelius, and Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, was the beginning of the spread of Christianity to "all the world."

THE WORLD-WIDE CHURCH, CHAPTERS 11:19 - 28

We also, see that~this outward movement of evangelism from Jerusalem reaches beyond the boundaries of Palestine all the way to Antioch. In chapter 11 verse 19 we read: "Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen traveled as far as Phenice and Cyprus and Antioch, preaching the word to none but Jews only. And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus."

Thus, the first big event in the spread of Christianity beyond Palestine was the founding of the great Gentile Church at Antioch, in Syria. Antioch then becomes the center, instead of Jerusalem, for the spread of the Christian movement westward.

It was here at Antioch that the disciple were first called Christians; and here for the first time Christians came into contact with a high degree of Greek and Roman culture. As we saw earlier it was not the Apostles, but men from the island of Cyprus and Cyrene, who

had been at Jerusalem and who introduced the Gospel to the Gentiles at Antioch (11:20). Gentiles in large numbers believed and turned to the Lord. When news of these conversions came to the ears of the church at Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to investigate. When Barnabas came and saw the success of the Gospel in Antioch among the Gentiles as well as the Jews, he was glad and returned a year later to help with the work bringing Saul with him (11:22-25).

Under the leadership of Barnabas and Saul, large numbers of the people were taught and became converts. The impact of all this was that the disciples were first called "Christians" at Antioch (11:26).

Because of a famine in Jerusalem the Antioch Church collected money according to each one's ability to give and then sent Paul and Barnabas with this money to place it in the hands of the Elders at Jerusalem.

In chapter 12 we have the death of James the brother of John at the hands of Herod Agrippa I, son of the Herod who beheaded John the Baptist. When Herod Agrippa saw that it pleased the Jews, he arrested Peter and bound him in chains in prison, with a view to putting him to death also. But the miraculous escape of Peter not only defeated Agrippa's plans, but caused him to leave Jerusalem for Caesarea, where soon afterward "an angel of the Lord smote him" and he dies (12:23).

PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

On their return to Antioch, Barnabas and Saul, together with other outstanding teachers and prophets, continued to minister to the Church at that important center. But the Spirit had other work for Barnabas and Paul and so instructed the Antioch Church to set them apart for this special missionary work to which they had been called. Notice in the beginning it is "Barnabas and Saul" but Saul becomes the leader, changes his name to Paul, and the team becomes "Paul and Barnabas."

This first missionary journey is reported in chapters 13 and 14. Among the places mentioned en route, these are they at which ministry is recorded:

- Salamis 13:5
- Paphos 13:6
- Antioch 13:14
 (Pisidia)
- Iconium 13:51
- Lystra and 14:6,20
 Derbe
- Return 14 21,22
 journey

Now with the exception of Lystra and Derbe we find that in every case, on this first missionary tour, the two apostles went "to the Jew first," and therefore began at the synagogue. As for Lystra and Derbe, besides the probability that there was no synagogue at either, it may be doubted whether there were Jews in those two places at all. The narrative says: "And there came thither Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead." [It is my judgment that Paul was dead after the stoning, and that God raised him from the dead.]

What was the message which the two apostles preached on this first missionary journey? We well realize that Luke's reports of their utterances are necessarily abbreviations; but the gist of the message is clearly preserved. Moreover, Luke summarizes it at the end of the itinerary (24:21,22), "And when they had preached THE GOSPEL to that city, and had disciplined many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium and Antioch (Pisidia), confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into THE KINGDOM OF GOD." The message was that of Jesus as Messiah-King and Personal Savior.

What were the results of this first missionary tour? Take the visited places in order.

Salamis	no results is stated
Paphos	no result is given so far as the general reaction is concerned, but we find opposition from the Jewish sorcerer, and sympathetic response from a Gentile official.
Antioch in Pisidia	there is an awakened interest shown by many Jews and proselytes in the synagogue (13:43); but it is followed by bitter opposition from the Jewish community (verses 45,50). The notable thing is that there is a glad acceptance of the Word by the Gentiles (verse 42, 44,48); and it is here, in the face of Jewish hostility, that Paul says, "...lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (verse 46).
Iconium	a "large number" (not a great multitude as in the A.V.) in the synagogue, both of Jews and Greeks, believed (14:1); but there is bitter opposition again from the Jews as a whole (verses 2,4), who also incited Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas (verse 2,5).
Lystra and derbe	here Jewish pursuers stir the mob against the Apostles, yet many Gentiles are disciplined (verses 19,21).

Thus we see that the Jews were more and more closing the door against the apostolic witness, and that at the same time the "door of faith" was being opened to the Gentiles (14:27). From the opening visit to Cyprus, it would seem as though the two had intended to go exclusively to the Jews. In Antioch and Iconium they are forced to recognize that they cannot go exclusively to the Jews, though they still go to the Jew first (13:46). When we see them as fugitives in Lycaonia they have been fairly driven out to the Gentiles.

On returning to their home base, they "rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how He had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles" (14:27). A great transition was

taking place. **More and More we see those other words assuming prominence; "AND ALSO TO THE GENTILES."**

THE COUNCIL MEETING AT JERUSALEM

After Paul's return from his first missionary journey, there continued to be much controversy in the Church at Jerusalem on the question of circumcision. That Paul on this missionary journey did not require the Gentile converts to be circumcised or keep the ceremonial law to be baptized was strongly criticized at Jerusalem by the Pharisaic party within the church. In fact, some of them had gone to Antioch and other Gentile centers, teaching and preaching that "except that you be circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved" (15:1).

After dissension arose, Paul and Barnabas were appointed to go to Jerusalem, to submit the question to the authority of the Apostles and Elders. At the Council meeting in Jerusalem, after Peter had spoken, and after Paul and Barnabas had reported on the work of the Spirit among the Gentiles, then James, the brother of our Lord and head of the Jerusalem Church, urged the Apostles and Elders not to place the burden of circumcision on the Gentile Christians. They all agreed

A committee was named to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch, and with them they carries a letter from the Jerusalem Church clarifying the circumcision issue

PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Paul's second missionary journey runs from chapter 15:41 - 18:22. Paul had in mind to visit the brethren in the cities where they had preached on their first journey. But as we shall see, this journey took Paul far beyond the cities of their first tour into Asia Minor, and included also for the first time some of the great cities of Europe - in Macedonia and Greece

Going overland this time through Syria and Cilicia, Paul and Silas first revisited the churches founded on the first journey, strengthening their faith and adding new converts to their numbers. Under the direction of the Spirit, Paul comes to Troas and receiving a vision from God goes over into Macedonia a Roman province, on the west side of the Aegean Sea, in Europe.

It is here at Troas that Luke joins with Paul and Silas, seeing he changes from the third person in his narrative to the first, indicating that he now was present and an eyewitness to the events of which he writes (16:10). They cross over the Aegean Sea into Macedonia.

Paul now goes to Philippi, then on to Thessalonica, from there to Berea, to Athens, onto Corinth, then for a short stay at Ephesus on his return to Antioch.

Like his first missionary journey he either had little response from the Jews or bitter opposition. Although at Thessalonica the response seems very favorable at first, it is only "some" of the Jews who accept the word; the "multitude" who accept are Greeks (17:4). The cheering spot (so far as Jewish inclination is concerned) is Berea, though even there it is clear that the larger part did not respond. Jewish opposition seems to have reached the high-water mark at Corinth (15:6,12-17). It is in connection with this that we have the

last recorded word spoken by Paul before he begins his return to Antioch, "From henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles" (18:6)

PAUL'S THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY

The Third missionary tour covers chapters 18:23 - 21:3. This was to be the last and the greatest of the three missionary journeys - the climax so to speak, to all of Paul's evangelistic work in the great cities which were the cultural and commercial centers of the West. As in the second missionary journey, Paul and his fellow evangelists again went by way of the overland route, north from Antioch, through the Cilician Gates and the Taurus Mountains, and visited the churches in southern Galatia, and Phrygia, the same churches which he and Barnabas organized on the first journey, and which he and Silas re-visited in the early of the part of the second journey.

The one place *at* which ministry is described is Ephesus, and the whole of Chapter 19 is devoted to it. Paul remained here about three years, using Ephesus as headquarters, and all Asia Minor as his parish.

The method was again to the Jew first (verse 8). The message was "the kingdom of God" (verse 8). The reaction was largely unbelief and opposition on the part of the Jews (verses 9,13), though there seems to have been some measure of response. As to the result, there was a turning to the Gentiles, among whom there was a widespread movement (verses 9, 18-20). Luke summarizes the results of this journey in 19:11, "And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul."

PAUL AT JERUSALEM AND CAESAREA

Paul's final visit to Jerusalem was surrounded by an air of mystery and tragedy. Luke records that at every city *at* which they stopped, Paul was warned that danger and "afflictions" awaited him (20:23). And when their ship finally landed at Tyre, the disciples there warned Paul again not to go to Jerusalem.

From Tyre, they went coastwise down to Caesarea, where Philip the evangelist, and the old prophet Agabus, and all the disciples, warned Paul. In the words of Luke, "We and the people there begged him not to go to Jerusalem" (21.12).

Why did Paul thus feel impelled to rush into the mouth of danger, against the advice of all his friends?

For one thing, Paul had spent more than a year gathering a great offering among his Gentile churches for the poor Christians of Jerusalem. Also, the churches had sent their personal delegations with their gifts. So, in Paul's view, this would be both a realistic and symbolic demonstration of the love, and Unity, of Gentile and Jewish Christians.

In particular, since the day of his conversion, Paul had a deep sense of mission. He felt that his whole life was a demonstration too of the Gospel, of the salvation of the Lord Jesus. "For me to live is Christ," he was in the habit of saying. He had been a witness to the Gentiles, "to the end of the earth." Now he would be a witness at Jerusalem also. So, contrary to the opinion of his friends, Paul thought that it was the will of God that he face the dangers of this mission, as he had faced the dangers of his missionary journey in the Gentile nations.

The vision that came to Paul at night in the Roman barracks, and which Luke quotes as follows, seems to bear out this view:

"The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome" (23:11).

How Paul was rescued from the mob and enemies in Jerusalem by the Roman Tribune, and transferred under heavy guard at night to Caesarea, where he spent the next two years in the care of the Roman governor of the province all this, and more, is reported briefly by Luke, in chapters 21 -26.

THE LONG VOYAGE TO ROME

After two years of waiting for his freedom, Paul and his two close friends, Luke and Timothy and perhaps others, set sail for Rome. For Paul had appealed his case to Caesar, as was his right as *a* Roman citizen (26:32,27:1).

For one reason and another, their passage was delayed until late autumn, in A.D. 60, when the winter storms on the Mediterranean are ordinarily avoided by prudent travellers. Paul left Caesarea as *a* prisoner, with other prisoners, bound for Rome and *a* hearing before the Emperor. Before they had completed their voyage, Paul was virtually captain of the ship in which there were *a* total of 276 passengers, and other cargo. Taking advantage of every opportunity, Paul preached Christ to both officers and men, and many believed and took courage for their safety. Luke gives *a* most vivid account of the voyage (chapters 27 - 28).

TWO YEARS WITH PAUL AT ROME, THE FIRST IMPRISONMENT

At Rome, as at Caesarea, Paul as a "prisoner" was allowed much liberty. He was permitted to live in his own house, at his own expense, with only one soldier as guard. He virtually kept an open house and carries on his ministry with the greatest freedom.

The last chapter of Acts is characteristic of the book as a whole, in that it pin-points again the two main themes of the book. The first is occasioned by Paul's final interview with the Jews, this time the Roman Jews, in which once more, and finally insofar as the book is concerned, they rejected the Gospel. Paul's reaction to their rejection of the Kingdom of God was most devastating, when he quoted from Isaiah (6:9-10):

Go to this people, and say, You shall indeed hear but never understand, And you shall indeed see but never perceive.

The other main theme of the book is related in the closing words, in which the reader is given a picture of the chief Apostle to the Gentiles, at Rome and in the center of the Gentile world, "preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus, with all confidence, no man forbidding him (28:31).

END of Lesson

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