

Acts

The Acts of the Apostles tells the history of the first 30 years of the church. It starts with the great commission of the risen Christ to the disciples to be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) and finishes with Paul under house arrest in Rome, the centre of the then known world, proclaiming the gospel “with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31). In between these bookends Luke tells us what the apostles did and said, their “acts”, in obedience to the last command of Jesus.

From How Christianity Changed the World – Acts from Roseville Anglican Church 2016.

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Notes

In preparing these studies I've used the following sources: Bible studies called How Christianity Changed the World – Acts from Roseville Anglican Church, Acts from Crossroads Christian Church, Canberra, The Mission of the Risen Jesus 10 Bible Studies on the book of Acts and Unstoppable Acts 1-7 by Kerry Nagel, Mission Unstoppable Acts by Bryson Smith, the Bible Brief on Acts chs 1-9 by Bryson Smith from The Briefing magazine # 300, Acts for Everyone part 1, chapters 1-12 and Paul for Everyone Galatians and Thessalonians by Tom Wright, The Message of Acts by John R.W. Stott, unpublished notes by Mark Strom which became part of his book Days are Coming 1992, reprinted as The Symphony of Scripture 2001, 7 talks and notes from 24/4 to 11/12/2015 by Tony Golsby-Smith on Hebrews from www.gospelconversations.com.au, personal notes from a lecture “On Living in a Blighted World” by Iain Provan at Scots Presbyterian Church, Sydney, 13/8/2016, New Bible Commentary 3rd edition, New Bible Dictionary 3rd edition, Lion Handbook to the Bible Second Revised Edition, Acts by I. Howard Marshall from the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, and various websites:

Study 1, Acts ch 1, Beginning

Getting started

1. What steps do you take before beginning a major project e.g. building an extension to your house, painting a room, writing a book, planning a holiday?



Bible

2. Read Acts 1:1-3 and Luke 1:1-4.
How are the two books of Luke and Acts connected?

3. In Acts 1:1, the author says he wrote about what Jesus “began” to do.
What, do you think, this tells us about the book of Acts?

4. Read Acts 1:4-11.
 - (a) What were the disciples expecting as they waited for the Father’s gift (see Eze 36:24-30)?

 - (b) What signs are there that the disciples don’t yet understand Jesus’ plans and purposes (vv 6-8)?

 - (c) What does Jesus say he wants the disciples to do? (v.8)

 - (d) Where will they need to go?

 - (e) Why do they need to wait in Jerusalem, for the time being?

 - (f) From verse 3, how has Jesus already equipped them for their task?

 - (g) Luke’s description of Jesus’ ascension into heaven (v9-11) is tantalising in its lack of detail. The cloud was no ordinary cloud that just happened to be drifting by to obscure the apostles’ view. Rather it signified the glorious presence of God himself, as at the Transfiguration (cf. Mark 9:7, see also Exodus 24:15-18, 1 Kings 8:10-11). Jesus was not merely departing the earth, he was entering heaven. What difference does it make to you that Jesus is now with the Father in heaven?

To finish

5. The apostles were people like Peter, James, John . . .
 - (a) What do you know of their track record with Jesus up until then?

 - (b) How surprising is it that Jesus wanted them for his mission?

 - (c) How is this encouraging for us?

6.
 - (a) What would you say is the “Next Phase” in God’s plan for the world, as described in Acts 1:1-11?

 - (b) How does the risen Jesus continue to grow his kingdom today, do you think?

Study 2, Acts 1:12-26, Replacing Judas

Getting started

1. Say you were asked to select someone to be on the Parish Council of a church.
 - (a) What steps would you take to make your decision?

(b) Is the toss of a coin likely to come into your deliberations? Why/why not?



The story so far . . .

From last week we saw how Luke transitions from his gospel to his account in Acts of all that Jesus did. The first study was about Jesus' ascension to his Father and his commissioning of the apostles with the words from v8 "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

Bible

2. (a) Read Acts 1:12-17.
 - (i) Where are the believers' – the followers of Jesus – gathered?
 - (ii) Why, do you think?

(b) How many are there, and in what way might this be surprising (v15)?

(c) Read Acts 1:16-17 then 1:20-22 (we will come back to Judas' death in vv 18-19). From these verses why, according to Peter, must Judas be "replaced"?

Can you think of another reason?

(d) Peter said in v 16 "the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas". So we are going to look up where David/HS spoke about Judas.

Peter quotes from 2 psalms written by David in Acts 1:20.

Look up Ps 69 and we will read vv19-28.

Context: Ps 69 is fairly long so we won't read all of it but in the verses before v 19 David is in serious trouble with his enemies attacking him. He pleads with God to rescue him. In the verses we are going to read David pours out his anger on his attackers and in the final verses David praises God because David has faith that God will save his people.

Read Ps 69:19-28.

(i) What does this say about Judas?

(ii) In Acts 1:20a Peter quotes Ps 69:25. What does Ps 69:25 say about Judas?

Peter also quotes from Ps 109. Look up Ps 109.

Context: Like Ps 69 David is again in trouble with his opponents and again he lets rip. At the end of this psalm David praises God and asks for salvation from his enemies.

Read Ps 109:1-15.

(iii) What does this say about Judas?

(iv) In Acts 1:20b Peter quotes Ps 109:8. What does Ps 109:8 say about Judas?

(v) Is there anything in Peter's use of these 2 psalms that troubles you?

(vi) How can you reconcile these problems?

(e) What "qualifications" must Judas' replacement have (v21-22)?

(f) Why are these "qualifications" important?

(g) Now we will look at the death of Judas. Read Acts 1:18-19 and Matt 27:3-10.

(i) How can you reconcile the discrepancies between these 2 accounts of Judas' death?

(ii) Is there any need to reconcile these discrepancies? Why/why not?

Attempts to harmonise these statements go back at least to Augustine. It is perfectly possible to suppose that after he had hanged himself, his dead body either fell headlong (the usual meaning of *prenes*), assuming that the rope or tree branch broke, or 'swelled up' . . . and ruptured. . . .

So did the priests purchase the field, or did Judas? It is reasonable to answer that both did, the priests entering into the transaction but with money which belonged to Judas.

From The Message of Acts by John R.W. Stott pp 55-56.

(h) Read Acts 1: 23-26.

(i) How is the decision made to replace Judas? What 3 steps were involved?

(ii) Could a woman have been selected (see Luke 8:1-3, 10:39, 24:10, Rom 16:7)?

Why/why not?

(iii) Why did the disciples cast lots for Judas' replacement?

(iv) Would you use this method of selection in church today (check your answer to Q1)?

Why/why not?

The tradition of casting lots is in the Bible several times. They are thought to have been used in 1 Samuel 14:40 - 42. In this case, however, it is not the lots but rather the Urim and Thummim used to render a decision. According to the first century Jewish historian Josephus, the Urim was composed of two sardonyx stones, each one within a pouch in the Breastplate worn by the High Priest. This breastplate is known as the breastplate of judgment. That said, the practice of lots was used frequently in ancient Israel.

The primary reason for casting lots was to render an impartial, unbiased decision on important matters. Once they were cast, no one could argue that the decision was the result of human intervention like nepotism, politics, favouritism, and so on. This practice would be the same as throwing dice or flipping a coin we commonly use today. In ancient times, they used varying means to cast lots, depending on the place and local customs, such as coins, polished sticks, cards, dice, and so on.

What is particularly significant is the fact that, in ancient Israel, the High Priest did use from time to time the tradition of casting lots for important, uncertain decisions. It amounted to consulting God for the answer, as Proverbs states "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:33). This impartial practice stops arguments and contentions between people (and no doubt could prevent them from occurring in the first place). The book of Proverbs states that "Casting lots causes contentions to cease, and keeps the mighty apart." (Proverbs 18:18). The last written case in the Bible of its use is in Acts chapter 1, when the apostles asked for God's decision regarding the choice between two men to replace Judas.

From www.biblestudy.org

Casting lots was a method used by the Jews of the Old Testament and by the Christian disciples prior to Pentecost to determine the will of God. Lots could be sticks with markings, stones with symbols, etc., that were thrown into a small area and then the result was interpreted.

Scripture cites many instances of people casting lots. It seems to have been used for important decisions when there was not enough guidance through wisdom and/or Scripture. For example:

Lev 16:8 And Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for the scapegoat.

1 Chr 25:8 And they cast lots for their duties, all alike, the small as well as the great, the teacher as well as the pupil.

Ps 22:18 They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

Matt 27:35 And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots.

Acts 1:26 And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

In the New Testament, after Judas killed himself, the disciples cast lots to see who would be his replacement. The lot fell to Matthias, but this was before Pentecost. Since the New Testament does not have any instance of Christians casting lots to discern the will of God after Pentecost, we conclude that after the arrival of the Holy Spirit we do not need to rely on that method, but instead must rely on the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the further revelation found in the New Testament.

From <https://carm.org> article by Matt Slick.

To finish

3. (a) From Acts 1:3 and Acts 1:22 (i) what event have all the witnesses seen?

(ii) How might this be important for us?

(b) How did Peter know about God's plans (vv16 and 20)?

(c) What does this tell us about where we should look to know God's will?

Study 3, Acts ch 2, Pentecost

Getting started

1. How do you think about the Holy Spirit?



The story so far . . .

As Luke transitions from his gospel and continues his account of all that Jesus did, chapter 1 recounts Jesus' ascension to his Father and commissioning of his apostles.

Bible

2. Read Acts 2:1-13.
(a) What happened?

(b) Why did people think they were drunk (v 13)?

(c) How is this event related to the mission (see Acts 1:8) that Jesus gave them?

3. Read Acts 2:14-21.
Peter is quoting from Joel 2:28-32. Context: After a locust plague that destroys much of the land and devastates the people Joel describes an unstoppable army who will come on the Day of the Lord. Surprisingly, God will be leading this army. But there is a chance the people will survive if they return to God. In his mercy, God eliminates the invaders and restores the land and his people. As part of this restoration God promises to pour out the Holy Spirit.

(a) How does the quote from Joel fit in with what has been described in Acts 2:1-13?

(b) Why weren't they seeing visions and dreaming dreams?

(c) What does the coming of the Holy Spirit indicate about what is yet to come?

4. Look up the following passages. How do they enrich our understanding of Pentecost?
(a) Gen 11:1-9.
Context: After the creation stories and the Flood people tried to make a name for themselves by building a tower to the heavens.

(b) Ex 19:16-20.

Context: God has brought his people out from slavery in Egypt. Three months into their journey they meet with God who comes down from Mt Sinai.

(c) Eze 36:25-27.

Context: God's people have been exiled to Babylon because of their sin. But God promises a return to their homeland.

5. Read Acts 2:22-41.

(a) There are 14 evangelistic speeches in the book of Acts (2:14-41, 3:11-26, 4:8-12, ch 7, 8:26-40, 10:34-48, 13:16-43, 14:15-17, 16:29-34, 17:1-4, 19-34, 22:1-22, 24:10-27 and ch 26). In the course of these studies we will look at all of them and note the similarities and differences.

Note the verses from Acts 2:14-41 that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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6. If you are familiar with any modern methods of evangelism (e.g. Roman Road to Salvation, 4 Spiritual Laws, 2 Ways to Live, Christianity Explained, Alpha, Simply Christianity) how does Peter's speech compare with any of these modern methods?

7. Play "The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission – Introduction" by John Dickson, available at YouTube. Do you agree with any of John Dickson's "problems" with modern evangelistic courses (self-consciousness, talking too much, feeling the talk was all there was to evangelism)?

Why/why not?

Note: In his book Promoting the Gospel John Dickson explains the other ways, besides speaking, to evangelise, namely, prayer, living the godly life, financial contributions, works of the church and public praise.

8. Read Acts 2:42-47.

How do these verses present a challenge to our fellowship?

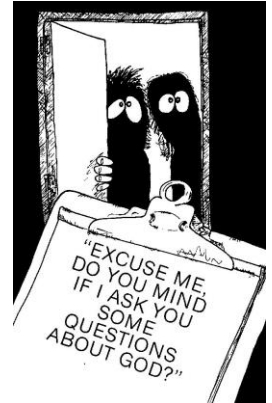
To finish

9. An unbelieving friend says to you, "I don't understand the difference between God and the Holy Spirit. How are their roles different and what difference does that make anyway?" How would you respond?

Study 4, Acts ch 3, The crippled beggar

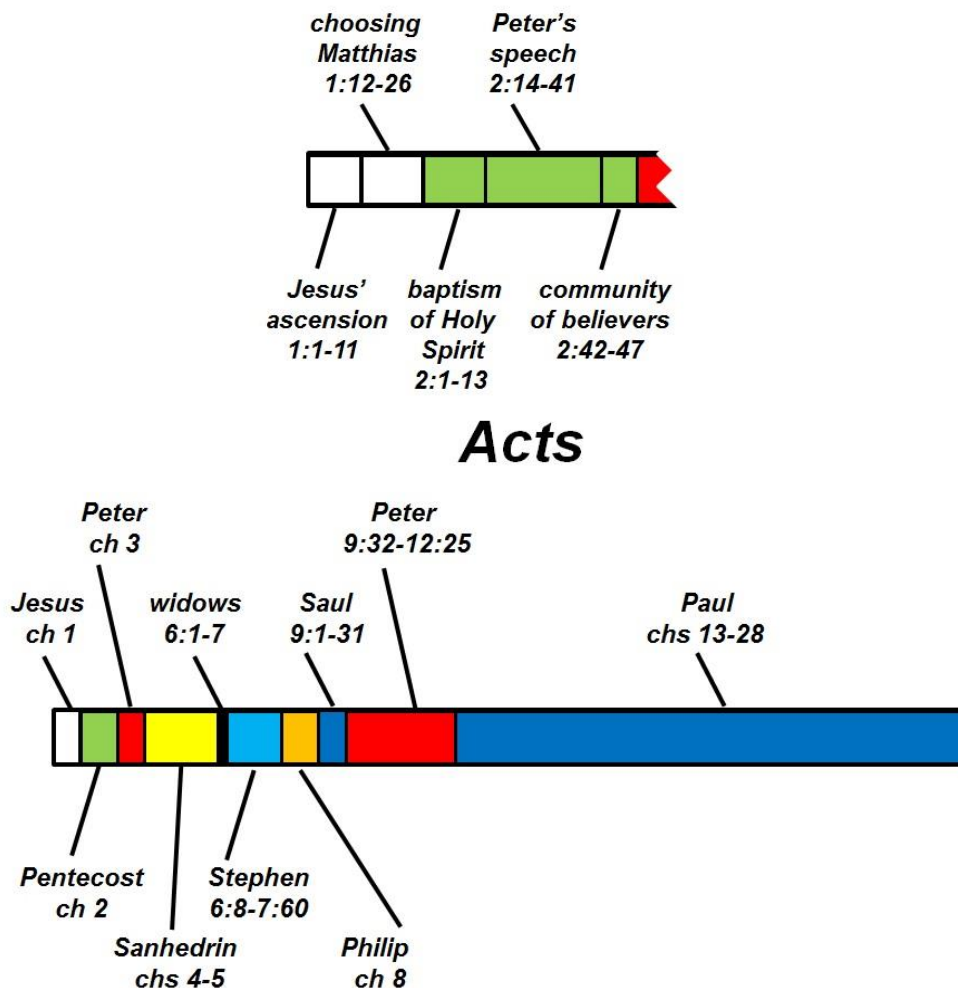
Getting started

1. What is difficult about evangelism?



The story so far . . .

Jesus has ascended to his Father and commissioned his apostles. The Holy Spirit filled the disciples and they spoke in foreign languages. Peter explained that they weren't drunk but that this was the result of Jesus' resurrection in sending the Holy Spirit. Many became believers.



Bible

2. Read Acts 3:1-10.
(a) What are we told about the beggar?

(b) The beggar is healed in the name of Jesus (v 6) although the power to heal is exercised through Peter. What does this say about the ministry of Jesus (see Acts 1:1 and Mark 2:1-12)?

(c) What does it mean to do something in Jesus' name, or to pray in Jesus' name?

(d) How is the beggar's response (v 8) a sign of the new age (see Isaiah 35:6, Luke 7:18-23)?

(e) The beggar had been sitting *outside* the temple courts (v 2) which suggests he was ceremonially unclean. In what way is this miracle a picture of the gospel?

3. Read Acts 3:11-26.

Note the verses that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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To finish

4. "Peter and John are superheroes of the faith. It's easy for them to be so brave. I'm just a normal person. I can't be expected to be as bold as them."
What do you think?

Study 5, Acts 4:1-5:11, Before the Sanhedrin I

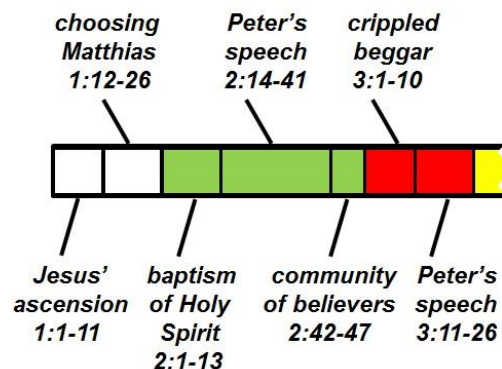
Getting started

1. What does Jesus' resurrection mean for your daily life?



The story so far . . .

Jesus has ascended to his Father and commissioned his apostles. The Holy Spirit filled the disciples and they spoke in foreign languages. Peter explained that they weren't drunk but that this was the result of Jesus' resurrection in sending the Holy Spirit. Many became believers. A crippled man was healed in Jesus' name and an astonished crowd gathered around Peter and John. Peter explained that it was God's power at work and he encouraged the people to respond to what Jesus had done for them.



Bible

2. Read Acts 4:1-22.
(a) Why were the Sadducees disturbed by the things Peter and John had been saying?

By Jesus' day **the Sadducees** were the aristocracy of Judaism, possibly tracing their origins to the family of Zadok, David's high priest. Based in Jerusalem, and including most of the leading priestly families, they had their own traditions and attempted to resist the pressure of the Pharisees to conform to theirs. They claimed to rely only on the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), and denied any doctrine of a future life, particularly of the resurrection and other ideas associated with it, presumably because of the encouragement such beliefs gave to revolutionary movements.

From Acts for Everyone part 1, chapters 1-12 by Tom Wright p 207.

The **Sadducees** weren't religious like the Pharisees. They were more pragmatic and were looking for a return to the Hasmonean dynasty which was in power before Herod – anyone was better than having a Gentile on the throne.

From a sermon by Mike Paget on Matt 22:15-46, St Barnabas, Broadway 7/8/2011.

- (b) Why is Jesus' resurrection so important?

- (c) From what you've heard in church does Jesus' death or his resurrection get more emphasis?

- (i) Why is it given more emphasis?

(ii) Should the other be given more emphasis? Why/why not?

(d) What factors affect the actions of the Sanhedrin?

The Sanhedrin comprised the high priests (that is the acting high priest and those who had been high priest), members of the privileged families from which the high priests were taken, the elders (tribal and family heads of the people and the priesthood) and the legal experts. The whole comprised both Sadducees and Pharisees. It exercised not only civil jurisdiction according to Jewish law but also criminal jurisdiction in some degree. It had administrative authority and could order arrests by its own officers of justice. It was empowered to judge cases which did not involve capital punishment. Capital cases required the confirmation of the Roman procurator.

From The New Bible Dictionary p 1143.

(e) Check the numbers in Acts 1:15, Acts 2:41, Acts 4:4.

Who is responsible for this growth?

3. In Acts 4:8-12

(a) note the verses that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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(b) What claims does Peter make?

(c) In an age of pluralism (the acceptance of all religious paths as equally valid) and relativism (the concept that there is no absolute truth but rather everything is relative and subjective according to differences in perception and consideration) how should we go about communicating the message of Acts 4:12?

4. Read Acts 4:23-31.

(a) After their release the disciples quote from Psalm 2 (see Acts 4:25-26).

Read Psalm 2. Why would this psalm give particular comfort to the disciples?

(b) Why don't we pray the words of Acts 4:29-30?

5. Read Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37.
(a) What was the early church all about?

(b) What were the strengths and weaknesses of the early church?
(For weaknesses you might like to look up Acts 5:1-11 and Acts 6:1-7.)

(c) A middle aged married couple come for the first time to your church one Sunday. You begin chatting with them after the service. They ask "What is your church all about?"
You reach for a pamphlet to give them and they say, "No, no, what is your church all about for you personally?"
What would you say?

(d) Then they say, "All churches have strengths and weaknesses. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your church?"
What would you say?

6. Read Acts 5:1-11.
(a) What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?

(b) Why do you think they acted as they did?

(c) Why do you think God judged them, as he did?
Should they have been given a choice of repenting or leaving the church?

7. Read Acts 5:11-16.
How do people respond to these recent events, and why?
- i. In verse 11?
 - ii. In verse 13?

To finish

8. (a) What does all this indicate about the character of the “Kingdom of God”?
- (b) How might the attitudes and values we see in this section challenge us as followers of Jesus today?
- (c) Relating to Q5,
(i) how should we encourage the strengths of your church?
- (ii) how could we fix the weaknesses at your church?
9. (a) What do you think led to the spirit of fellowship and generosity among the early Christians?
- (b) In what ways does this encourage or challenge us today?

Study 6, Acts 5:12-42, Before the Sanhedrin II

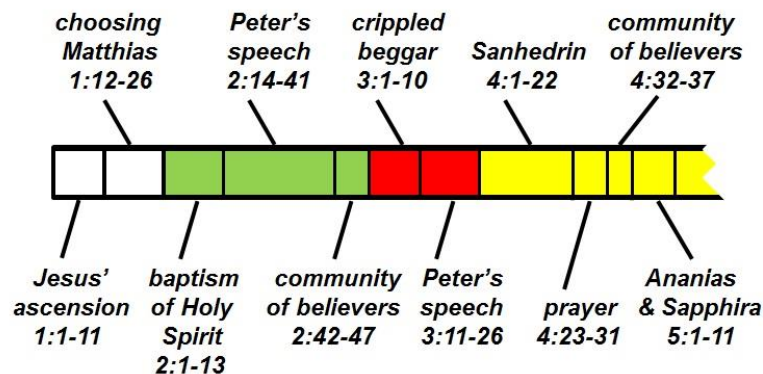
Getting started

- How do you persuade someone to agree with your point of view?



The story so far . . .

With the coming of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the apostles many people became believers. Great generosity and sharing followed. One problem with Ananias and Sapphira was quickly and decisively dealt with.



Bible

- Read Acts 5:12-42.
What is different between Acts 5:12-42 and Acts chs 3 & 4?
Consider (a) the reasons for the opposition.

(b) the numbers of people involved.

(c) the intensity of the opposition.

Peter and John's conviction of the importance of Jesus also shines out in their confrontation with the Jewish leaders. This confrontation must have been very scary for them. They are standing trial in the room in which Jesus probably stood trial, before the men who condemned Jesus to death, arrested for much the same reasons. The authorities don't like the claims about Jesus. Peter and John must have been thinking that it was their turn now to face death. This is what makes their speech so remarkable. It is a speech of courage, born out of the conviction that it is vitally important for people to hear about Jesus (3:8-12).

From Mission Unstoppable Acts by Bryson Smith p 22.

- What does Peter mean in Acts 5:29?

4. (a) What is Gamaliel's argument (Acts 5:34-39)?

(b) How is his argument prophetic?

To finish

5. So far in Acts we have seen the risen Christ has been opposed because of theological reasons (Acts 4:2) and jealousy (Acts 5:17). What are other reasons that Christianity is criticised and opposed?

Study 7, Acts chs 6 & 7, Stephen

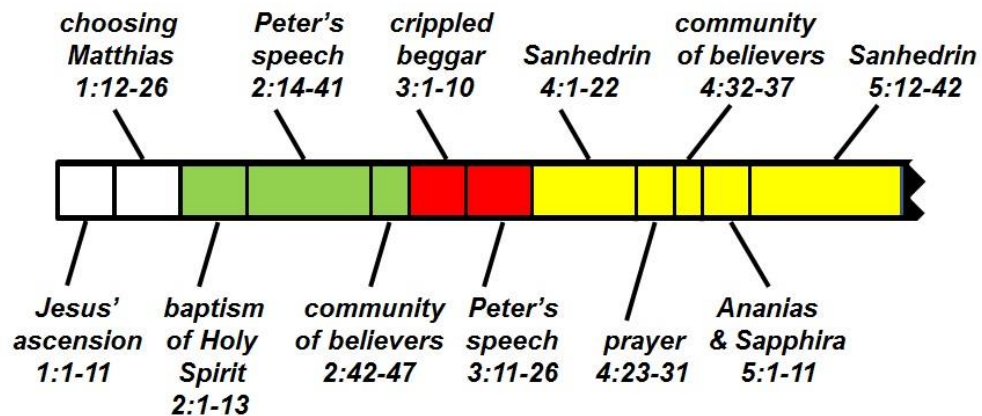
Getting started

1. What are the most important jobs in church? Give reasons.



The story so far . . .

With the coming of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the apostles many people became believers. Great generosity and sharing followed. One problem with Ananias and Sapphira was quickly and decisively dealt with. Throughout Acts 3-5 we read of the remarkable growth of the Christian church, so clearly empowered by the Spirit of God that many responded with awe. But at the beginning of Acts ch 6 we hear of another discordant threat to the unity of the church.



Bible

2. Read Acts 6:1-7.
 - (a) Outline the steps that the church took in order to address the problem presented by the complaint concerning the Greek/Hellenistic widows.

(b) What do you like or dislike about this process?

(c) What was at stake?

It may seem that '**waiting at tables**' was a somewhat menial task, but remember that it was usually the head of the household's role to distribute the food (thus Jesus' actions at the Last Supper of taking, blessing, breaking and distributing bread in Luke 22:19; cf. Luke 9:16, 24:30). The word for 'distribution' also hints at financial stewardship of the community's shared resources. So 'waiting at tables' was actually a role with significant responsibility. The Seven, and other 'deacons' who followed, were highly respected and had defined qualifications for office. See 1 Tim 3:8-13 and Rom 16:1-2.

From How Christianity Changed the World – Acts Bible studies from Roseville Anglican 2016.

3. The apostles dedicated themselves to 'the ministry of the word and prayer' while the deacons ensured that all the poor within the Christian community were cared for appropriately and equally. In this way, both evangelism/teaching and pastoral care/social justice were taken care of.

Do you think this means:

(a) that evangelism and social justice can be efficiently delegated to different branches of the church?

Why/why not?

(b) that 'the ministry of the word and prayer' is more important than 'the ministry of serving at tables'?

Why/why not?

4. Read Acts 6:8-15.

(a) What charges are laid against Stephen?

(b) Why do you think these charges are so serious?

5. Read Acts ch 7.

(a) Stephen's speech finishes abruptly when the people are so enraged that they stone him.

Note the verses that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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(b) Why does Stephen talk so much about the Old Testament?

(c) How is Stephen's speech a defence against the charges in Acts 6:14 (see Acts 7:35-39, 44-50)?

(d) What most annoys the Sanhedrin ?

(e) "The God of the Old Testament is one of wrath and judgement, but the God of the New Testament is one of grace and love." How do you think Stephen would have responded to this comment?

Study 8, Acts ch 8, Philip

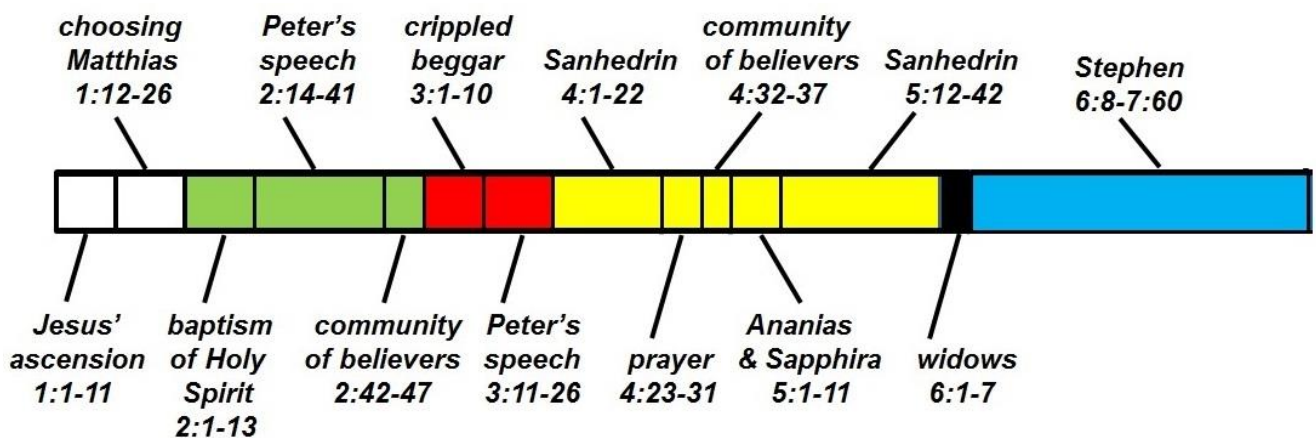
Getting started

1. (a) Why do you think some people leave one church to go to another church?
- (b) When is this a good thing?
- (c) When is this a bad thing?



The story so far . . .

With the coming of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the apostles many people became believers. Great generosity and sharing followed. One problem with Ananias and Sapphira was quickly and decisively dealt with. Throughout Acts 3-5 we read of the remarkable growth of the Christian church, so clearly empowered by the Spirit of God that many responded with awe. But at the beginning of Acts ch 6 we hear of another discordant threat to the unity of the church: the Hellenistic widows are being neglected in the daily distribution of food. 7 “deacons” are appointed to handle the problem. Stephen, one of the deacons, performed miracles and spoke convincingly about Jesus. Opposition from the Sanhedrin resulted in his execution.



Bible

2. Read Acts 8:1-3.
 - (a) What are the negative results of Stephen's death?
 - (b) Why do you think the apostles stayed in Jerusalem?
3. Read Acts 8:4-25.
 - (a) What do you already know about Samaria and the way that Jerusalem Jews feel about Samaritans (see Luke 9:51-56; John 4:4-9, 20-23)?

(b) What are the positive results of Stephen's death (compare Acts 8:1 and 8:4 with what Jesus said in Acts 1:8)?

(c) What did Simon get wrong?

(d) In what way is Simon similar to Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11)?

(e) Why do you think the Holy Spirit had not come upon any of the people prior to the arrival of Peter and John?

4. Read Acts 8:26-40.

(a) Note the verses that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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(a) What are we told about the Ethiopian?

(b) Why do you think Luke singles out this event for special attention?

(c) What do we learn here about the risen Christ?

(d) Why do you think we are told that "the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away" (v 39)?

To finish

5. Rejoicing and joy are often associated with conversions in Acts (see Acts 8:8, 8:39) but in our modern experience this initial joy seems to subside with time.

(a) Why is this?

(b) How can we prevent it?

(c) Should we try to prevent it? Why/why not?

Study 9, Gospel

Getting started

1. (a) How do you think non-Christians would define the Christian religion?



- (b) Would Christians agree with that definition? Why/why not?

2. What is the gospel?

3. Where would the gospel fit in with a better definition of the Christian religion?

4. Wikipedia's definition of religion: Religion is a cultural system of behaviours and practices, mythologies, world views, sacred texts, holy places, ethics, and societal organisation that relate humanity to what an anthropologist has called "an order of existence".

What would "religionless" Christianity look like?

Bible

The word "gospel" is first used in Acts in Acts 8:25 and then again in 8:40. In answering the questions above it may seem that there is some confusion amongst Christians as to what the gospel is. The gospel is a vital key to understanding the New Testament so it is important to get it right. This is why we are having a break from studying Acts and hopefully this study will clarify our ideas on what is the gospel.

The word "gospel" = good news/tidings has its origins in Isaiah when God's people had been defeated, their cities destroyed and all but the poorest people were taken into exile into Babylon. To that situation Isaiah speaks the following good news:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

Isaiah 40:1-2

You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!' See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.

Isaiah 40:9-10

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'

Isaiah 52:7

5. (a) From the three passages above what is the good news?

For Israel, the good news is as much about God's kingly rule over the world (Is 40:9-10) as it is about his forgiveness (Is 40:1-2). The gospel proclaims both a Saviour who pardons wrong and a King who puts things right.

From the 2012 sermon series on Isaiah at St Andrews, Roseville by John Dickson.

God's people returned from exile to live again in the land God had promised them. But it was tough going and things didn't turn out as well as they had expected. "The Jews of Jesus' day were sick of being losers. Nearly five centuries had passed since the last of the Old Testament prophets, and during that period, with a few exceptions, Israel had suffered nothing but humiliation at the hands of the Gentiles (first the Greeks and then the Romans). . . . Into this mixed environment of messianic hope strode Jesus, proclaiming that the time had finally come - the kingdom of God was at hand."

From The Good Living Guide Matthew 5:1-12 (The Beatitudes) p 11 by Phillip D. Jensen and Tony Payne.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'

Mark 1:14-15.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'

Luke 4:16-21

- (b) From the two passages above what is the good news?

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve.

1 Cor 15:1-4

- (c) What is the gospel = good news in the passage above?

- (d) How does it fit in with the previous passages on good news?

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Rom 1:16

From Paul for Everyone Galatians and Thessalonians by Tom Wright pp 167-168.

- ## To finish

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Study 10, Acts 9:1-31, Saul

Getting started

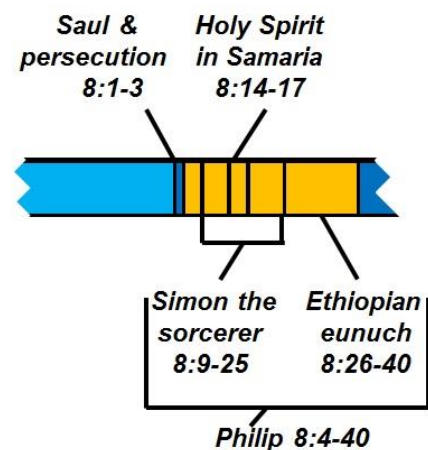
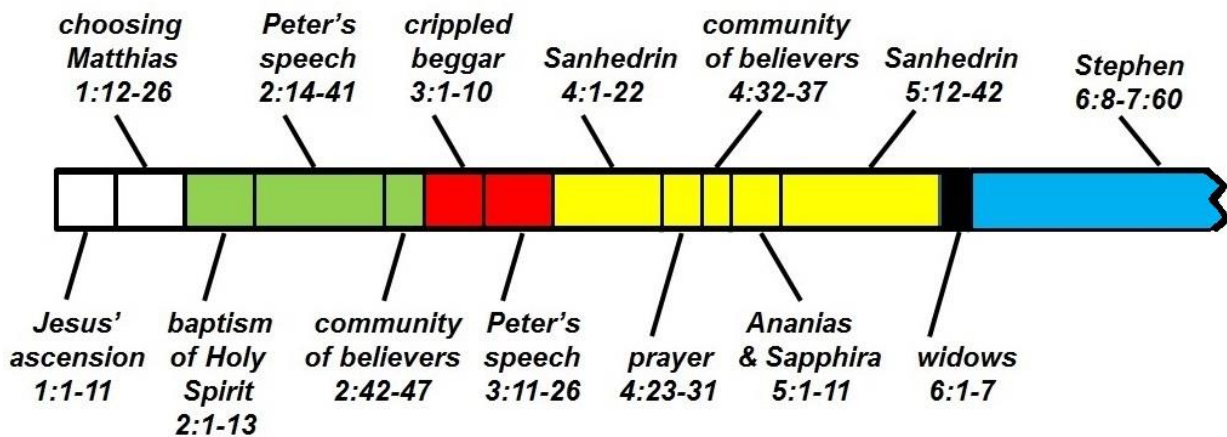
1. Would you describe your conversion as an encounter with Jesus? Why/why not?



2. If not, how would you describe your conversion?

The story so far . . .

With the coming of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the apostles many people became believers. Great generosity and sharing followed. One problem with Ananias and Sapphira was quickly and decisively dealt with. Throughout Acts 3-5 we read of the remarkable growth of the Christian church, so clearly empowered by the Spirit of God that many responded with awe. But at the beginning of Acts ch 6 we hear of another discordant threat to the unity of the church: the Hellenistic widows are being neglected in the daily distribution of food. 7 “deacons” are appointed to handle the problem. Stephen, one of the deacons, performed miracles and spoke convincingly about Jesus. Opposition from the Sanhedrin resulted in his execution. Saul (Paul) approved Stephen’s execution and participated in the persecution that scattered the church throughout the land. Philip went to Samaria preaching and healing and met a man of dubious motives, Simon the sorcerer. Peter and John arrived to check out the new believers and the Holy Spirit came on the Samaritans. Philip also met an Ethiopian on the way to Gaza and he came to faith in Jesus.



Bible

3. Read Acts 9:1-31.
- (a) How would you describe Saul
 - (i) in vv 1-2?
 - (ii) in vv 3-9?
 - (iii) in vv 17-25?
 - (iv) in vv 26-31?
 - (b) How was Saul persecuting Jesus (vv 4-5)?
 - (c) Why was Ananias afraid (vv 10-19)?

To finish

4. When Saul arrives in Jerusalem (vv 26-27), he meets Barnabas, the 'son of encouragement.'
- (a) Have there been significant people in your growth as a Christian like Barnabas was for Saul?
 - (b) To whom might you be a Barnabas, intentionally encouraging them and helping them in their faith?
5. A friend shows you a newspaper article claiming that religious conversion experiences are really just subjective psychological states that are easily explained away as a response to some inner crisis. How might you helpfully respond in a way that highlights the objective reality of your encounter and personal relationship with Christ?

Study 11, Acts 9:32-12:25, Peter

Getting started

- Expectations are very important in shaping what we do. If someone does not expect to win a sporting contest they generally don't win. And they don't win because they don't really work at the contest. It is the same in other areas of life especially to do with our expectations of what God will do through us or in us.

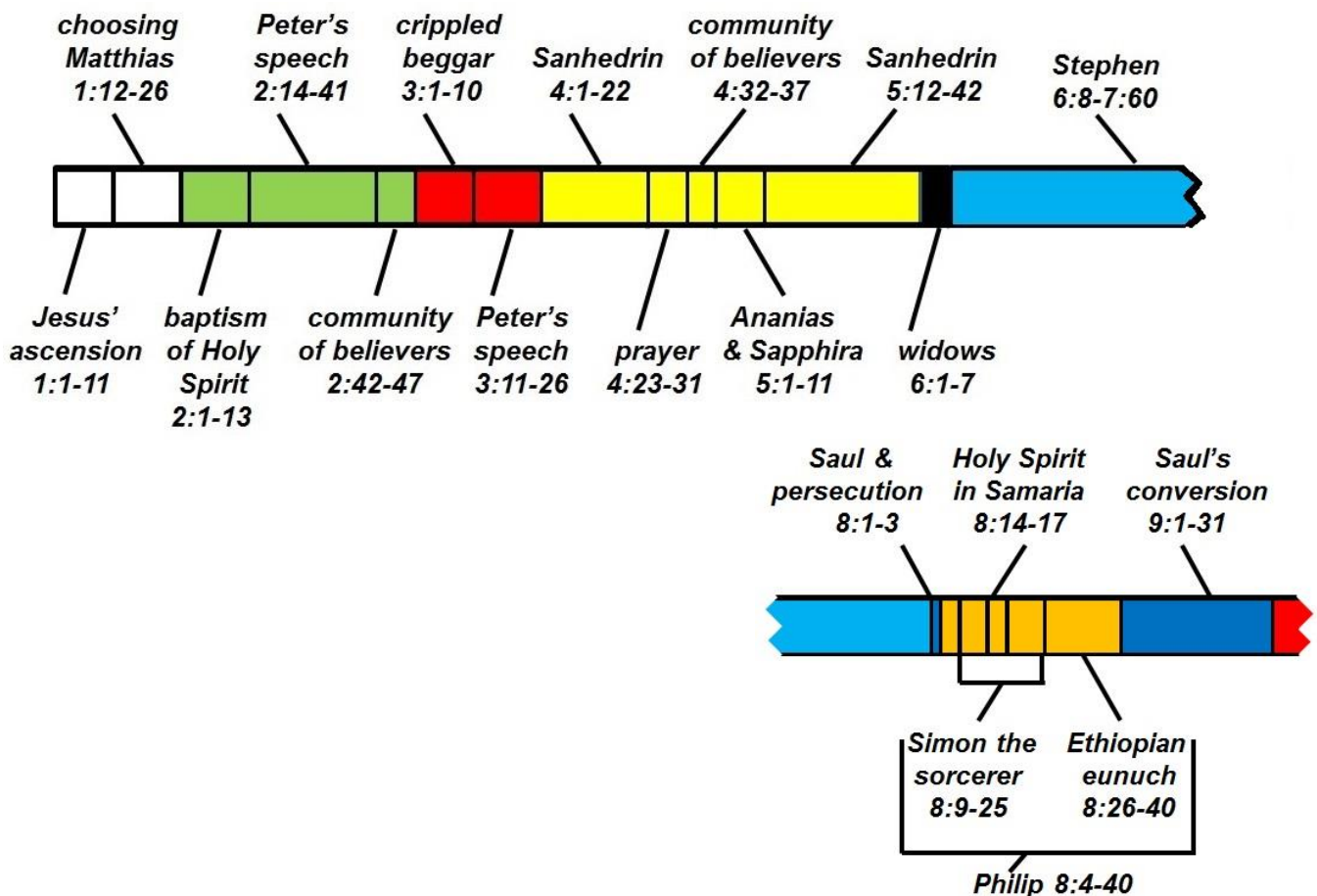
From The Mission of the Risen Jesus 10 Bible Studies on the book of Acts by Kerry Nagel p 32.

Discuss what you think God is doing or wants to do through you at the moment.



The story so far . . .

The Holy Spirit has come. The apostles have been speaking about Jesus and were persecuted for doing so. One of their persecutors, Saul, met the risen Jesus and had his life turned around. Saul joined the disciples and began preaching about Jesus and the church continued to grow.



Bible

- Read Acts 9:32-10:48.
(a) Why did Cornelius need a vision (10:1-8)?

God fearer. Acts 10:2, 22.

This term has come to be used for Gentiles who worshipped Yahweh and attended the synagogue, but had not submitted to circumcision. The Greek phrases used by Luke ('fearing God, 'worshipping God') do not have a technical sense, however, and can be used of any pious worshippers of God, whether circumcised (so probably in 13:43) or not (as here).

From Acts by I. Howard Marshall from the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries pp 183-184.

(b) What does Peter mean by saying some animals are impure or unclean (10:14)?

(c) Why do you think Peter's vision is repeated 3 times (10:16)?

(d) What lesson does Peter learn from his vision (10:24-48)?

(e) Note the verses from Acts 10:34-48 that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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(f) Why does the word "everyone" have special significance in 10:43 (see Gen 12:1-3 and also how Peter begins his speech in 10:34-35)?

3. Read Acts 11:1-18.

(a) Why is Peter criticised by the believers in Jerusalem?

(b) How does Peter respond to the criticism?

(c) In describing these events Luke uses a lot of the details from the previous chapter. Why do you think he does this?

4. Read Acts 11:19-30.

(a) (i) What type of people are turning to Jesus?

(ii) How is this similar to the events concerning Cornelius?

(b) Why do you think the believers in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch?
Why is Barnabas a particularly good person to send (see Acts 4:36 and 11:20)?

(c) Why is it natural that Barnabas would contact Saul (see Acts 9:26-29)?

5. Read Acts ch 12.
(a) James is dead. Peter is in prison. You're an ordinary Christian meeting in Mary's house.
How do you feel?

(b) You're Peter. You've been chained between two soldiers, and suddenly you find yourself in the main street. What are you thinking?

(c) You're an ordinary Christian and you've been praying in Mary's house. There's a knock on the door.
Who do you expect it to be? Why?

(d) James dies. Peter lives. What do you think about this? What does this teach us about God
and our trust in him?

(e) Compare the attitude of Herod (Acts 12:21-23) with that of Peter (Acts 10:25-26)?

To finish

6. Just as Jewish believers had their expectations about Gentiles challenged, do we have trouble
accepting new ideas? Try to remember a new idea that you had a problem with (e.g. home computers,
internet dating, mobile phones).

(a) How did you react initially?

(b) How did you come to accept it?

(c) Is there something to learn here about the next new idea that might
come along?

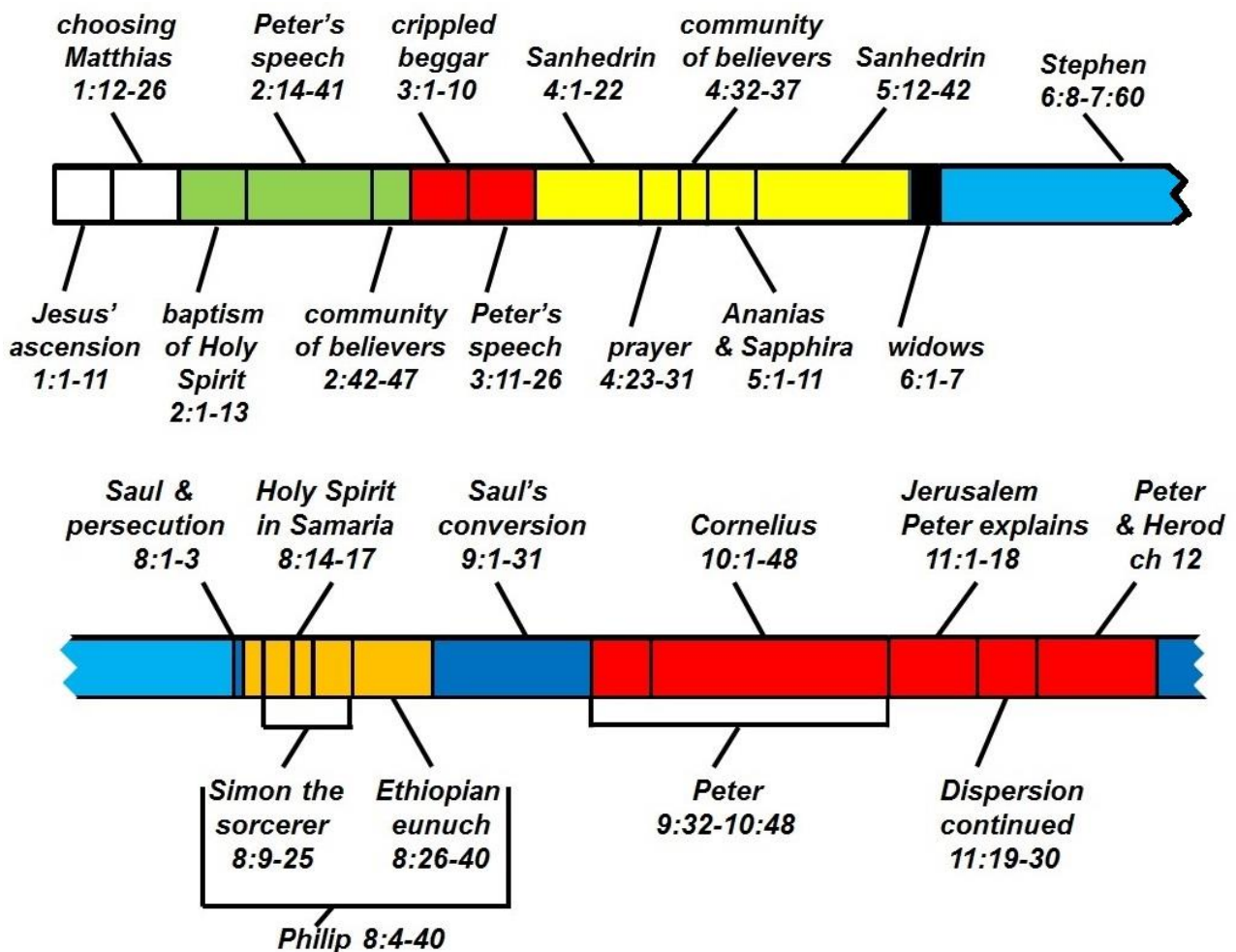
Study 12, Acts chs 13-14, Travelling

Getting started

1. When you go on holidays do you go to church? Why/why not?
2. Is there a difference in your spiritual activities while you are on holidays compared with when you are not on holidays? Why/why not?

The story so far . . .

The Holy Spirit has come. The apostles have been speaking about Jesus and were persecuted for doing so. One of their persecutors, Saul, met the risen Jesus and had his life turned around. Saul joined the disciples and began preaching about Jesus and the church continued to grow. The next section involved Peter. He is called to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, and all the Gentiles there received the Holy Spirit. Peter had to explain this in Jerusalem and Gentiles were accepted into the church. Peter was arrested by Herod but miraculously escaped. Later Herod accepted adoration as a god and was struck dead by an angel.



Bible

3. Read Acts 13:1-12.
Check their progress on the map below.



From Mission Unstoppable Acts by Bryson Smith p 55.

4. Read Acts 13:13-52.

(a) Note the verses from Acts 13:13-52 that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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Ironically, Paul gives a very similar speech to Stephen whom he had helped to execute. Paul shows how the gospel he preaches is the climax to God's promises (see Acts 10:23, 32-33).

(b) What points does Paul make by quoting from the following verses from the Old Testament?

(i) Psalm 2, quoted in Acts 13:33

(ii) Isaiah 55, quoted in v 34.

Context: In the first 39 chapters Isaiah deals mostly with God's judgement and the Assyrian threat. Babylon becomes the next aggressor and God's people are taken into exile. A new phase in God's dealing with his people begins to unfold in chapter 40 – a time of comfort and forgiveness. Chapters 41 and 42 - God is ruler of the nations. He will bring justice to the nations through his Servant. Chapters 43 to 55 – Isaiah explains how God fulfils his promises through his Servant.

(iii) Psalm 16, quoted in v 35

(iv) Habakkuk 1, quoted in v 41.

Context: Habakkuk prophesied to Judah from 630 – 597 BC approximately. Habakkuk saw the Lord deliver the death blow to the cruel Assyrians, but was then horrified to witness the rise of the even crueller Babylonians. He raised the tension between the relative sins of Judah and Babylon – Judah deserved judgement but Babylon was worse.

From unpublished notes by Mark Strom which became part of his book Days are Coming 1992, reprinted as The Symphony of Scripture 2001.

(v) Isaiah 49, quoted in v 47

(c) Why is the Old Testament important for understanding Jesus?

(d) How can the Old Testament enrich our knowledge of Jesus?

(e) Do you need to change your attitude or approach to the Old Testament?

If so, what practical steps can you take?

5. Read Acts ch 14.

(a) Check their progress on the map above.

(b) Note the verses from Acts 14:15-17 that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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(c) How do Paul and Barnabas approach evangelism in this Greek religious context?

(d) How does it differ to their evangelism among Jews?

(e) What does verse 22 mean? Haven't the disciples already entered the kingdom of God?

The *kingdom of God* (1:3, 6, 8:12) is thought of here [v 22] as the future realm to be established by God into which men may enter by death or by living until the parousia of Jesus (2 Tim 4:18).

From Acts by I. Howard Marshall from the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries p 241.

To finish

6. What can we learn about flexibility in reaching our culture with the message of Jesus?



Study 13, Acts ch 15, Jerusalem Council

Getting started

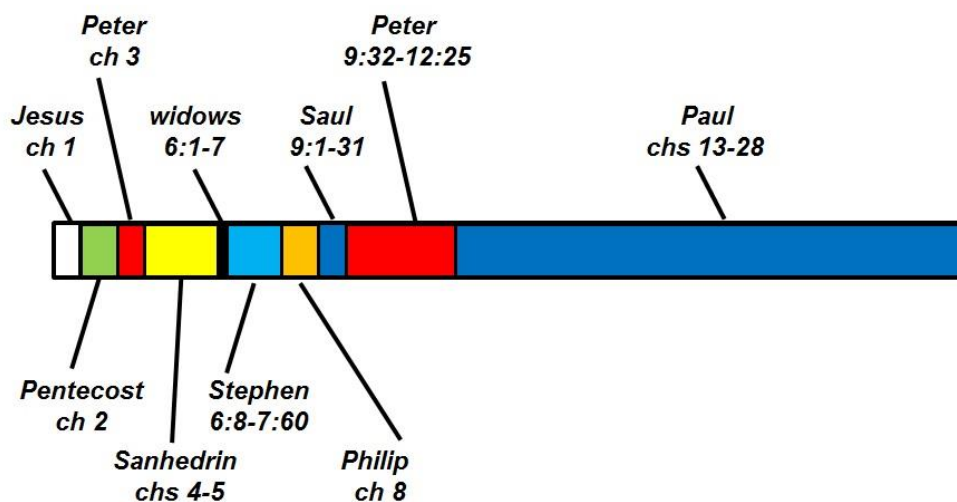
1. Think of a discussion/argument you had that involved a disagreement with another Christian e.g same sex marriage vote, scarcity of women on staff at St Faiths, overemphasis on sin at church, can a Christian lose his/her salvation?, euthanasia, stem cell research, Donald Trump, voting Labor/Liberal. Rather than get into the details of the discussion consider the following questions by keeping the particular discussion in mind:
 - (a) Who began the discussion?
 - (b) What were you trying to do with the argument?
 - (c) How did the discussion end?
 - (d) Did you learn anything from the discussion? If so, what? If not, why not?
 - (e) Did you or the other person change their mind?
 - (f) How did you feel at the end of the discussion?

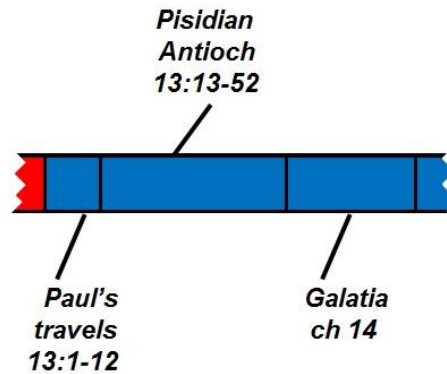


The story so far . . .

The Holy Spirit has come (ch 2). The apostles have been speaking about Jesus and were persecuted for doing so (chs 3-8). One of their persecutors, Saul, met the risen Jesus and had his life turned around. Saul joined the disciples and began preaching about Jesus and the church continued to grow (ch 9). Peter (chs 9-12) is called to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, and all the Gentiles there received the Holy Spirit. Peter had to explain this in Jerusalem and Gentiles were accepted into the church. Peter was arrested by Herod but miraculously escaped. Later Herod accepted adoration as a god and was struck dead by an angel. Paul and Barnabas began their first missionary journey (chs 13-14). Wherever they went people became disciples but some Jews opposed and persecuted them.

Acts





Bible

2. Read Acts 15:1-5.
 - (a) What problem comes to the fore?
 - (b) How does the text indicate how serious this issue is?
 - (c) What does the phrase “the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (v 5) suggest to you?
 - (d) Besides “the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” what other groups of people might have belonged to the early church?

Our first paradigm shift is to recognize that the early Christians did not call themselves Christians—we probably know this but don’t recognize its significance. We assume they mentally identified themselves as the ‘early church’ i.e. a non-Jewish, breakaway movement without a name yet. But in fact, it looks much more likely that they thought of themselves as a continuation of Jewishness not a complete break from it and Judaism was not a homogenous social unit. They formed into five segments.

1) *Pharisees* who were the letter of the law guys. They emphasized the law above all else and it was they who created the para- biblical rules, commentaries and books that have ended up defining Judaism since the first century.

2) The *Sadducees* who were tied to the temple and its rites. They were mortal intellectual enemies of the Pharisees and you can easily see this as Paul played them off against each other. Obviously they collapsed with the destruction of the temple.

3) The *Zealots* who were in favour of political rebellion against Rome e.g. Simon the Zealot (Luke 6:15, Acts 1:13).

4) The *Essenes* who were monastics who withdrew from life and whose writings we found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

5) The *Baptisers* who stressed personal repentance and were led at first by John the Baptist. From 7 talks and notes from 24/4 to 11/12/2015 by Tony Golsby-Smith on Hebrews from www.gospelconversations.com.au

3. Read Acts 15:6-21.
 - (a)
 - (i) What do Peter and James say about the need for Gentiles to be circumcised?
 - (ii) Why do they say this?

(b) What is the “yoke” Peter is talking about in v 10?



Yoke. The rendering of several Hebrew and Greek words, used either literally for the wooden frame joining two animals (usually oxen), or metaphorically as describing one individual's subjection to another. From the New Bible Dictionary 3rd edition p 1260.

(c) What is one side of the argument expressed by
“the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (v5)?

(d) What is the other side of the argument expressed by - Peter (vv 7-11)?

- Paul & Barnabas (v 12)?

- James (vv 13-21)?

(e) What is James trying to do with his argument (vv 13-21)?

(f) In vv 16-18 how does James use Amos 9:11-12 to support his decision?

Context for Amos: God sent Amos as his prophet to Israel when the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah were split into north and south. It was a time of prosperity and affluence. Amos was sent to denounce the social and religious corruption beneath the surface, and to warn the nation of God's impending judgement. About 30 years later the Assyrians destroyed Samaria, took the people into exile and the northern kingdom ceased to exist.

(g) The council made it clear that salvation is by grace, not law keeping (vv 10-11). So how does the call for Gentiles to abstain from certain things (vv 19-21) support this?

(h) How does the discussion end?

Clearly Jerusalem is working as some kind of headquarters for the early believers and they are the ones who demand answers and set policy. The Council in chapter 15 is a major section that Luke gives a lot of attention to. James' endorsement of the Gentiles is fair but hardly a ringing endorsement; we can identify the traces of conservatism in his judgment, and we can feel the tension in the room and Jerusalem as he gives his verdict. He does not say "Let the Gentiles believe independently, and follow Christ only with no regard to Mosaic Law". He puts four stipulations on them, both moral and ceremonial. But his reasoning is strange to us: he says that they must abide by these four laws because "Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues every Sabbath" [Acts 15:21]. He is justifying the ruling by Moses and the widespread influence of Jewish customs, synagogues and Sabbath keeping. His reasoning does not emanate from the dying and rising of Jesus.

From 7 talks and notes from 24/4 to 11/12/2015 by Tony Golsby-Smith on Hebrews from www.gospelconversations.com.au

The Council at Jerusalem, having made it very clear that Gentiles are not saved by being circumcised, but are saved by the grace of God through the forgiveness of sins, went on to urge Gentile believers to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. This is most likely out of pastoral concern, so that there might be no unnecessary barriers to fellowship between Gentile and Jewish Christians (v 21).

From Mission Unstoppable Acts by Bryson Smith p 59.

4. It is not mentioned in Acts but it's about this time that Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. It seems that the men mentioned in 15:1 (or at least people like them) had followed Paul and Barnabas around on their trip, telling the new believers that they should be circumcised. When Paul heard about this he wrote the letter to the Galatians.

From Mission Unstoppable Acts by Bryson Smith p 60.

[H]e [Paul] was writing it [Galatians] probably on his way up to Jerusalem for the Council, which would be his third visit to the city, although he does not mention it in Galatians because it has not yet taken place; and that therefore the situation Luke describes at the beginning of Acts 15 is the same as that to which Paul refers in Galatians 2:11-16.

From The Message of Acts by John R.W. Stott p 242.

Read Galatians 2:11-21.

Context: Paul has no praise for the Galatians at the beginning of this letter. Instead he goes crook on them for turning away from the gospel. Paul tells the story of how he received the gospel directly from Jesus and how he even made a special trip to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1) to make sure he and the other apostles were on the same wavelength.

(a) What new facts does Gal 2:11-21 add to the events of Acts ch 15?

(b) In what ways does Gal 2:15-16 provide a good summary of the issues raised at the Council of Jerusalem?

5. Read Acts 15:22-35.

(a) What do the Apostles and other Christian leaders ask of the Gentile believers?

(b) Why do you think they ask this?

(c) The discussion at the Jerusalem Council had begun with the statement that Gentiles must be circumcised and obey the law of Moses to be saved. This argument came from “the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (Acts 15:5). Then we had arguments against that statement from Peter, Paul and James.

Do you think “the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” changed their minds?

Why/why not (see Acts 18:12-13, 20:3, 21:18-28)?

Context: Acts 18:12-13
After the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 Paul travels to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and by chapter 18 he is in Corinth. The following verses relate to Paul's time in Corinth.
[Read.]
In Corinth the Jews attack Paul and accuse him of teaching contrary to the law.

Acts 20:3
After Corinth Paul goes to Ephesus and then Macedonia where we pick up the text. . .
[Read.]
Again, opposition from the Jews.

Acts 21:18-28
Eventually they get to Jerusalem and Paul talks to James & the elders.
[Read.]
Again opposition from the Jews who accuse Paul of teaching against the law.

6. Read Acts 15:36-41.

(a) The conflict in this passage is an embarrassing detail included by Luke in his account of the apostles' ministry. In the light of the immediate context and other parts of Scripture, what do you think we are to make of this?

(b) How should we approach disagreements between Christians?

To finish

7. What does it take to change your mind about something?

Changing your mind about something is the beginning for growth, Christian growth. Let me explain that. By Christian growth I mean becoming more godly or becoming more like Jesus. To grow you have to change certain things in your character or behaviour and become more like Jesus. A change in behaviour starts with a change of mind. You've got to decide that you want to change. Once you've made that decision in your mind you can do something about it physically.

So the question is “What does it take to change your mind about something?”

Study 14, Acts chs 16-17, Philippi and Athens

Getting started

1. Think of your favourite subject at school or the course you studied at TAFE or uni.
(a) How much work did you do?



- (b) How enthusiastic were you?



Compare this with how much time and effort you spend on studying the Bible.

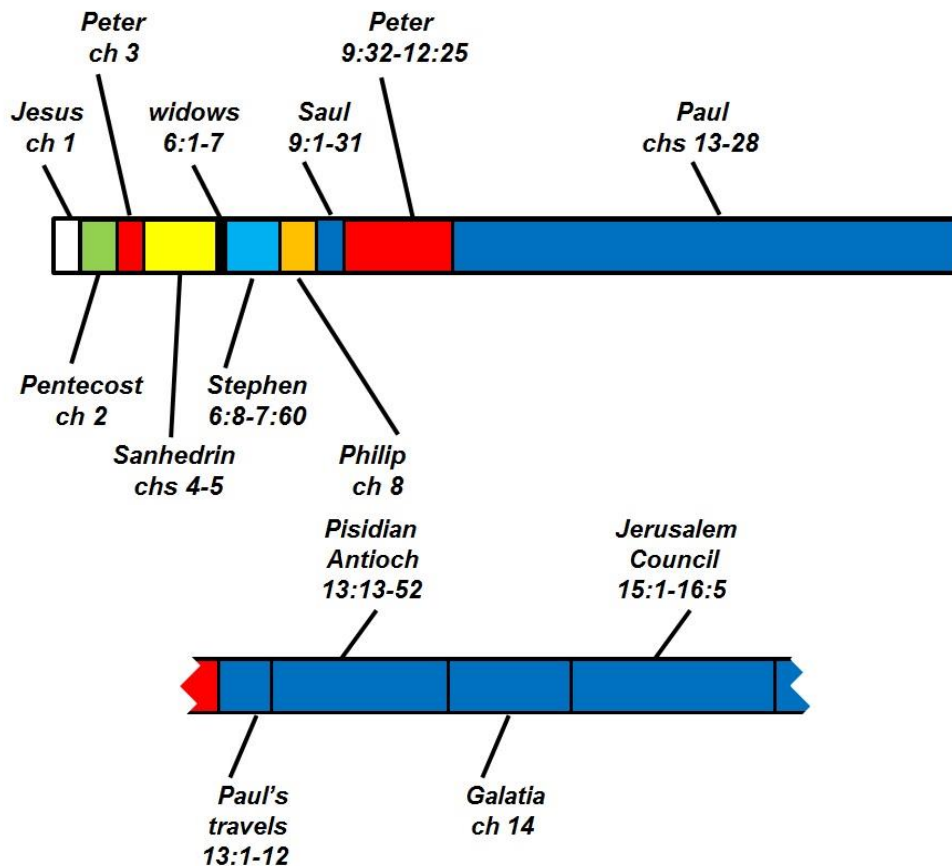
- (c) How does it compare?

- (d) How enthusiastic are you?

- (e) If there is a problem here, how can we fix it?



The story so far . . .



Focusing on Paul, he and Barnabas began their first missionary journey. Wherever they went people became disciples but some Jews opposed and persecuted them. Some people said you couldn't be saved unless you were circumcised. This dispute was taken to the Jerusalem Council.

Bible

2. Read Acts 16:1-12.

Check their progress on the map on page 30. Not all the place names appear on the map but the names that do appear should give you a rough idea of their travels.

(a) By looking at the last few verses of Acts ch 15 as well as this passage . . .

(i) who is "He" in 16:1?

(ii) who is Paul travelling with (note the change over from "they" to "we" in 16:10)?

(b) After making an issue of not needing to be circumcised in ch 15 why did Paul circumcise Timothy?

3. Read Acts 16:13-40.

(a) Note the verses from Acts 16:25-34 that describe each of the aspects concerning the gaoler's conversion:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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(b) Why does the jailor ask the question he does in verse 30?

(c) What do you think of the response in v31?

(d) What might the discussion in v32 have included?

(e) Throughout Acts it is clear that God is in control of events-- people, places, timing etc. What kinds of people does God choose as foundation members of the first Christian church in the very strategic Roman city of Philippi?

(f) What issues might the first Christians in that city have needed to address early on?

4. Read Acts 17:1-15.

(a) From vv 1-4 note the verses that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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(b) (i) What words describe how Paul shared the gospel at Thessalonica (vv 2-4)?

(ii) What do these words tell us about the nature of the gospel?

(c) (i) What reactions does the gospel receive in both Thessalonica and Berea?

(ii) How reasonable do you think these reactions are?

(d) Why do you think we are specifically told that in both Thessalonica and Berea prominent women and God-fearing Greeks believed (vv 4, 12)?

5. A middle aged married couple begin to regularly attend your church and you get to know them fairly well. Eventually they ask you how to become a Christian.
What points would you make in trying to answer that question?

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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6. Read Acts 17:16-21.

Why is Paul invited to speak to the meeting of the Areopagus?

7. Read Acts 17:22-31. (Note: a sign with this "address" printed on it stands on the Areopagus Hill in Athens today – in Greek of course!).

(a) List the key points Paul makes in his talk.

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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(b) Which of these "surprises" you? Why?

(c) What point stands out to you?

(d) Do any of Paul's points puzzle or confuse you? Why?

(e) What points did you make in question 5 that are not in Paul's points?

(f) Why is there a difference between your points and Paul's points?

f) Read Acts 17:32-34. Describe the responses to Paul's address.

Why do you think people responded as they did?

8. Compare Paul's talk in Athens with previous evangelistic talks:

Acts 2:14-41 (see study 3, p 8)

Acts 3:11-26 (see study 4, p 10)

Acts 4:8-12 (see study 5, p 12)

Acts ch 7 (see study 7, p 18)

Acts 8:26-40 (see study 8, p21)

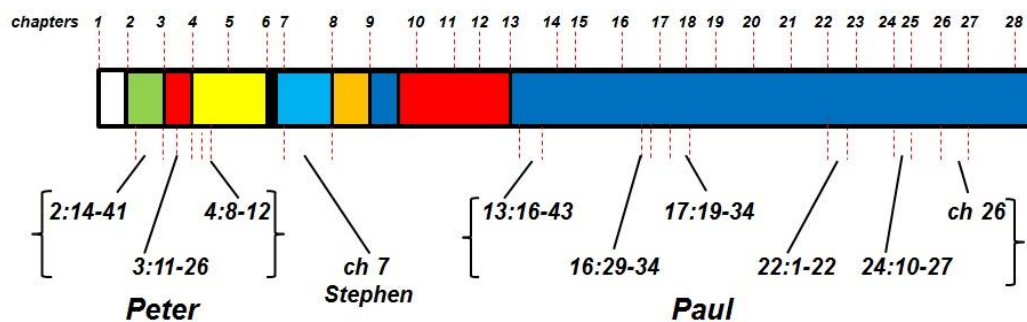
Acts 10:34-48 (see study 11, p 28)

Acts 13:13-52 (see study 12, p 31)

Acts 14:15-17 (see study 12, p 32)

Acts 16:25-34 (see study 14, p 40)

Acts 17:1-4 (see study 14, p 41)



(a) What is the one omission in Paul's talk in Athens (Acts 17:19-34) that appears in all the other talks?

(b) Why does Paul not talk about this aspect here?

(c) What principles for evangelism can we learn here?

To finish

7. "Christianity is just a blind leap of faith." What do you think about this statement?

Study 15, Acts 18:1-19:7, Corinth & Ephesus – Priscilla, Aquila & Apollos

Getting started

1. I'm going to play part of a song called "Spirit in the Sky" that was a hit in 1970. Hopefully this song will provoke some discussion.

Play SpiritInTheSkyShort.mp3

"Spirit In the Sky" (originally by Norman Greenbaum)

When I die and they lay me to rest
Gonna go to the place that's the best
When they lay me down to die
Goin' up to the spirit in the sky

Goin' up to the spirit in the sky
That's where I'm gonna go when I die
When I die and they lay me to rest
I'm gonna go to the place that's the best

Prepare yourself, you know it's a must
You gotta have a friend in Jesus
So you know that when you die
Gonna recommend you to the spirit in the sky

Gonna recommend you to the spirit in the sky
That's where you're gonna go when you die
When you die, and they lay you to rest
You're gonna go to the place that's the best.

(a) Any comments?



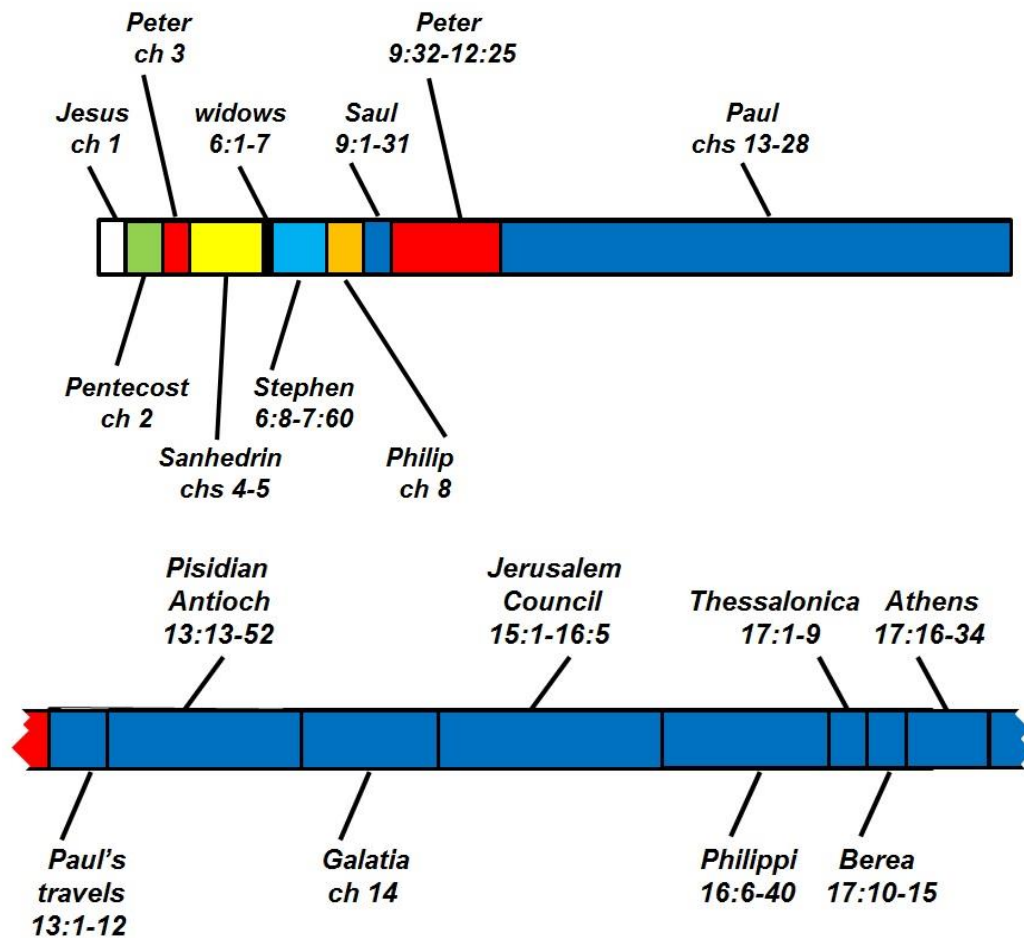
(b) Would you say it was a Christian song? Why/why not?

(c) Would you sing it in church? Why/why not?

The story so far . . .

Focusing on Paul, he and Barnabas began their first missionary journey. Wherever they went people became disciples but some Jews opposed and persecuted them. Some people said you couldn't be saved unless you were circumcised. This dispute was taken to the Jerusalem Council. Paul continued his travels but this time with Silas and Timothy. They went to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Athens.

Acts



Bible

2. Read Acts ch 18.
 - (a) What does this chapter tell us about Priscilla, Aquila & Apollos?

Priscilla

Aquila

Apollos

Alexandria was founded around a small Ancient Egyptian town c. 331 BC by Alexander the Great. It became an important centre of the Hellenistic civilization and remained the capital of Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Egypt for almost 1000. Hellenistic Alexandria was best known for the Lighthouse of Alexandria (*Pharos*), one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and its Great Library, the largest in the ancient world. Alexandria was the intellectual and cultural centre for some time. The city and its museum attracted many of the greatest scholars, including Greeks, Jews and Syrians. Alexandria was the second most powerful city of the ancient world after Rome.

- (b) Add to the above with more information about Priscilla & Aquila from reading Rom 16:3-4.

Context: Paul explains the gospel in the first 8 chapters of Romans. He argues about how the Jews fit in in the next 3 chapters and rounds things off with 4 chapters about how believers can help each other and the world. In the last chapter, chapter 16, Paul gives some final words of advice and sends greetings to his many friends.

(b) What have we discovered so far in Acts about Paul's mission strategy?

(i) What explanation would you give for this?

(ii) Does it have any bearing on our strategies and methods of outreach?

3. Read Acts 19:1-7.

(a) Much confusion has surrounded these verses, related to the reception, working and gifts of the Holy Spirit. How would you explain what is taking place?

(b) What is the significance of these events in the book of Acts?

(c) How did the Holy Spirit come upon the first Christians? Is there a pattern to the way things happened? Acts describes 4 events when the Holy Spirit came to Christ followers. We will go back through Acts to examine what happened, answer the same 6 questions of each event and see if we can come to some conclusions.

Here are the four passages and their contexts:

1. Acts 2:1-41 (Jerusalem)

Context: Jesus has risen from the dead and appeared to his disciples. Jesus asked the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. While they are waiting they choose Matthias to replace Judas.

2. Acts 8:14-17 (Samaria)

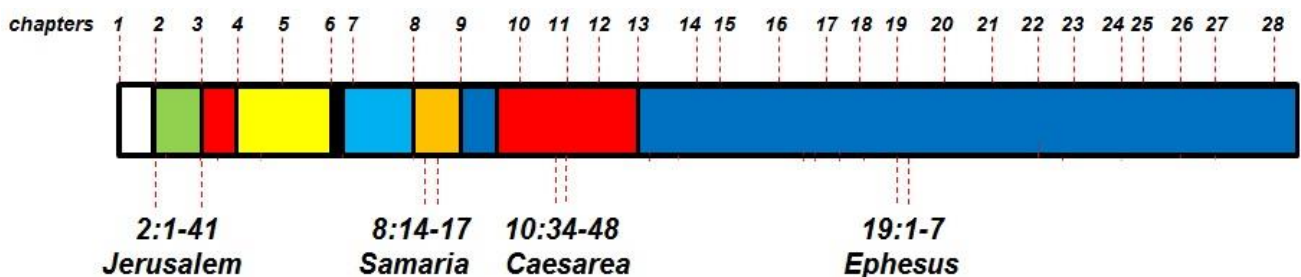
Context: Persecution of the church in Jerusalem meant that all the disciples except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Philip went to Samaria, preached about Jesus and many were converted.

3. Acts 10:34-48 (Gentiles in Caesarea)

Context: Peter has a vision about eating "unclean" foods. He is asked to come to see a Gentile, Cornelius, in Caesarea. Being a Jew, Peter is not supposed to visit Gentiles but he does because of the vision. Cornelius tells how an angel told him to send for Peter.

4. Acts 19:1-7 (Ephesus)

Context: Paul has been traveling around telling people about Jesus. He left Priscilla and Aquila at Ephesus where they met and helped Apollos who had been preaching about Jesus but didn't know about the baptism of the Holy Spirit.



1. Read Acts 2:1-41

(a) Why did the people get baptised (vv 37-41)?

Note: There are two groups here: the disciples sitting in the house together (v 1) and the people who were "cut to the heart" (v 37) after hearing Peter's speech. Answer the following questions for each group.

(b) Did they receive the Holy Spirit *when* they came to faith?

(c) Did they receive the Holy Spirit *after* they came to faith?

(d) Were they baptised in water?

(e) Was there a "laying on of hands"?

(f) Were any apostles present?

(g) Did they speak in tongues?

2. Read Acts 8:14-17

(a) Did they receive the Holy Spirit *when* they came to faith?

(b) Did they receive the Holy Spirit *after* they came to faith?

(c) Were they baptised in water?

(d) Was there a "laying on of hands"?

(e) Were any apostles present?

(f) Did they speak in tongues?

3. Read Acts 10:34-48 and when Peter explains this event in Acts 11:15-18

(a) Did they receive the Holy Spirit *when* they came to faith?

(b) Did they receive the Holy Spirit *after* they came to faith?

(c) Were they baptised in water?

(d) Was there a "laying on of hands"?

(e) Were any apostles present?

(f) Did they speak in tongues?

4. Read Acts 19:1-7]

(a) Did they receive the Holy Spirit *when* they came to faith?

(b) Did they receive the Holy Spirit *after* they came to faith?

(c) Were they baptised in water?

(d) Was there a "laying on of hands"?

(e) Were any apostles present?

(f) Did they speak in tongues?

In conclusion . . .

(a) Is there a common pattern for receiving the Holy Spirit?

(b) Is there a common factor for each event?

(c) Read Acts 1:8. What conclusions can we come to by considering these 4 events and Acts 1:8?

To finish

4. How would you respond if asked the question: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

Study 16, Acts 19:8-23:35, To Jerusalem

Getting started

Consider this scenario which might help you answer the following questions: You think you are a pretty good driver. You are proud of never being booked or having an accident, you passed an advanced driving course and reverse parking – no problem. One day you misjudge the size of a parking spot and muck up your reverse park. You try it again and still can't get in. You have been boasting to your passenger about how good a driver you are but now you have to swallow your pride and ask them for help.

1. What is the difference between pride and self-esteem?



Self-esteem reflects an individual's overall subjective evaluation of his or her own worth.

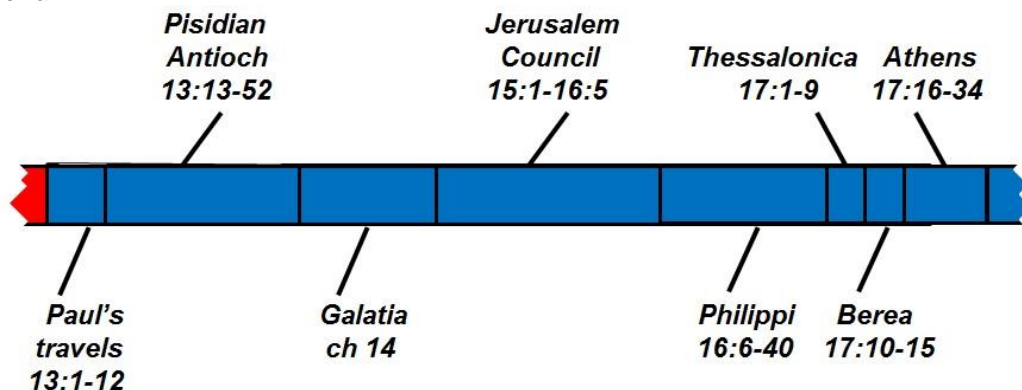
Pride – setting too high a value on one's worth, importance, achievements, position or ability
- arrogance, haughtiness, conscious of superiority.

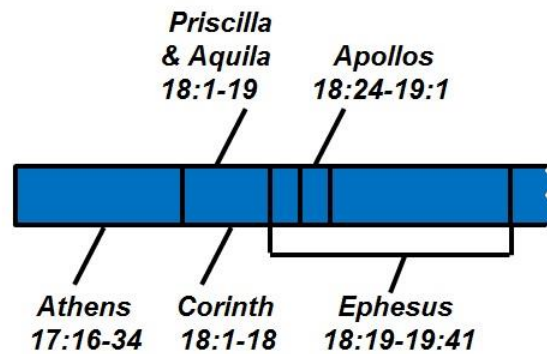
2. Should we be proud of ourselves when we achieve something significant? Why/why not?
3. What does it mean to “swallow your pride”?

“Swallow your pride” - to ignore one's ego in order to do or say something that one finds humiliating or below one's standards or position.

4. When, if ever, should we “swallow our pride”?
5. Can we still have self-esteem if we swallow our pride? Why/why not?
6. What is our self-esteem built on?

The story so far . . .





Focusing on Paul, he and Barnabas began their first missionary journey. Wherever they went people became disciples but some Jews opposed and persecuted them. Some people said you couldn't be saved unless you were circumcised. This dispute was taken to the Jerusalem Council. Paul continued his travels but this time with Silas and Timothy. They went to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, where they met Aquila and Priscilla, and then on to Ephesus.

Bible

7. Read Acts 19:8-20:12.
Paul decides to go to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21).
8. Read Acts 20:13-38. [The "we" in v 13 refers to the group of men mentioned in Acts 20:4.]
(a) Summarize how Paul describes his service of the church in Ephesus.

(b) Where is Paul going, and what does he expect?

(c) From verses 25-31, what does Paul tell the leaders of the Ephesus church to expect?

(d) What does he urge them to do?

[B]eginning at Chapter 20 we see Paul's emotional journey back to Jerusalem. We can read between the lines and recognize this is a deep thing for him. It is not a mere tactical return, and it is not like a missionary returning for R and R. This is an affair of the heart; his heart remains in Jerusalem and he wants to give them every chance to come with him to the full journey in Christ. We know that he is filled with foreboding and does not really expect to succeed and in fact this journey back is marked by poignant scenes of farewell and indeed by criticism or disagreement from other Christians who clearly do not think it is a good thing to go back to Jerusalem. Paul expects conflict there.

When he arrives back we see a violent mix of two ingredients: on the one hand, Paul's strange attempt to compromise with Judaism, and on the other the fearsome extremism of the unbelieving Jews—whom we can only describe as ungovernable, fundamentalist jihadists. All of my sympathies lie with the poor Roman governor trying to make sense of it all and calm everyone down!

But the thing to note is that Paul's presence caused uproar within days of his arrival—but the continued presence of James and the elders and the believing Jews had NOT caused any such uproar. In fact, they were living somewhat peaceably and they implored Paul to continue to keep the peace—by demonstrating that 'you yourself are living in obedience to the law'. SO we can only assume that they were participating in Jewish customs, the temple traditions and keeping Moses law while also defining themselves as believers in Christ.

I would posit therefore that they thought of themselves, and defined themselves, and presented themselves as the Jewish Baptist group, not a breakaway movement.

From "Hebrews part 1: Resurrection trumps religion" by Tony Golsby-Smith 24/4/2015.

9. Read Acts 21:1-36.

(a) What caused the uproar in Jerusalem?

(b) James and the elders had been in Jerusalem for some time and presumably they had been engaged in evangelism *without* causing the Jews to riot. Considering the advice given in Acts 21:4, 10-14 should Paul have swallowed his pride and *not* gone to Jerusalem (see also Acts 19:21, 20:22)? Why/why not?

10. Read Acts 21:20-21 again.

(a) Should Christians today circumcise their children, live according to Jewish customs and be zealous for the law of Moses? Why/why not?

(b) Should first century Jewish believers circumcise their children, live according to Jewish customs and be zealous for the law of Moses? Why/why not?

11. (a) James and the elders (v 18) seem to have feared an adverse reaction from the Jews.

(i) What advice did they give Paul (read Acts 21:23-24 again)?

(ii) Did it work? Why/why not?

(b) Remember the Jerusalem Council back Acts 15 where Paul & Barnabas came to Jerusalem to answer the claim that you couldn't be saved unless you got circumcised. To conclude the discussion James said that Gentile believers didn't need to get circumcised but they should abstain from "food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality from the meat of strangled animals and from blood" (Acts 15:20).

Do you think these concessions worked?

(c) Read Heb 12:1-2.

Context: The writer of Hebrews, addressing an audience of Jewish believers, works his way through Jewish concepts of creation, Law, rule, tabernacle, rest, priesthood, faith, covenant, the sacrificial system and he shows them that they are all superseded and obsolete but Jesus has brought in a way that is much better. In chapter 11 the writer describes Old Testament heroes ("such a great crowd of witnesses" 12:1) who believed in something God told them though they couldn't see it. Hence they became pilgrims - constant travellers here on earth, yearning in their hearts to be somewhere else with God in His unending city. This leads us to the writer's conclusion in chapter 12.

(i) What "things that hinder" (NIV) or "every weight" (ESV) should we "throw off" (NIV) or "set aside" (ESV)?

(ii) Do you think it would have been better if James & Paul had advocated for a complete break from Judaism? Why/why not?

12. Read Acts 21:37-22:22.

Note the verses from Acts 22:1-22 that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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13. Read Acts 22:23-23:35.

Summarising what happened to Paul in Jerusalem (Acts 21:37 – 23:35).

When the uproar dies down the Roman commander allows Paul to speak to the crowd. He speaks of his history of persecuting Christians and how he was converted on the way to Damascus. When he says how Jesus told him to witness to the Gentiles the crowd erupted again. At this the commander has Paul taken away to be flogged. Paul says he is a Roman citizen and escapes the flogging. The next day the commander takes Paul to the Sanhedrin to try to get to the bottom of the dispute. Paul talks about the resurrection which causes a dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Paul is whisked away by the Romans before it gets too violent. Then some Jews plot to kill Paul. When the commander gets wind of it he takes Paul with a detachment of soldiers to Caesarea to meet the governor, Felix (ch 24).

To finish

14. The following questions are about making mistakes. You could answer them as general questions or answer them in relation to the scenario at the beginning of this study i.e. you made a mistake in your judgement for reverse parking. You made another mistake by boasting about how good a driver you are.

Some people have difficulty admitting to their mistakes.

(a) What factors are at work when you've found you have made a mistake?

(b) Why is it difficult to admit to a mistake?

(c) What is good about making a mistake?

(d) What is good about admitting to making a mistake?

Study 17, Acts chs 24-26, Felix, Festus & Agrippa

Getting started

1. (a) Who is the most powerful or important person you have ever met?



(b) What were the circumstances?

(c) How did you feel?

(d) Were you nervous?

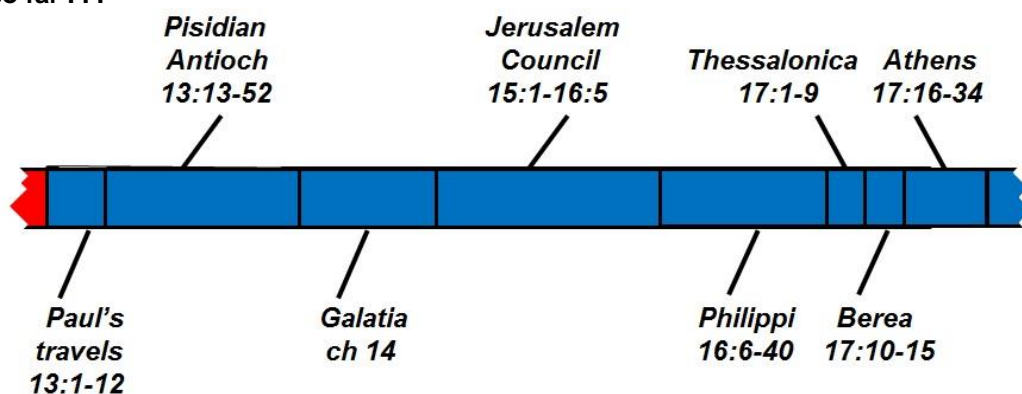
2. "All power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely".
This quote from the English historian, Lord Acton, was from a letter in 1887 which actually said "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."

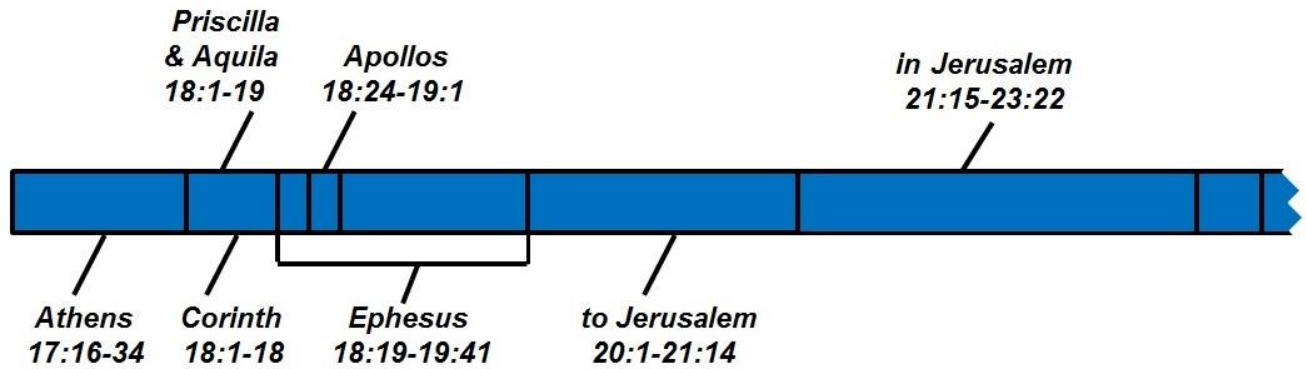
(a) Do you think it's true that "all power corrupts"? Why/why not?

(a) What does it mean if power goes to someone's head?

(a) Have you seen power corrupt anyone you knew? If so, how did power effect their actions?

The story so far . . .





Focusing on Paul, he and Barnabas began their first missionary journey. Wherever they went people became disciples but some Jews opposed and persecuted them. Some people said you couldn't be saved unless you were circumcised. This dispute was taken to the Jerusalem Council. Paul continued his travels but this time with Silas and Timothy. They went to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, where they met Aquila and Priscilla, and then on to Ephesus. Eventually they arrived at Jerusalem where Paul was beaten and arrested. Paul appealed to Caesar because he was a Roman citizen. So he was now to be taken to Rome.

Bible

3. Read Acts ch 24.
 - (a) What task had Paul set himself to do in Jerusalem (see Rom 15:25-27)?
 - (b) What was Paul doing when he was arrested in Jerusalem?
 - (c) Of what crime(s) did the High Priest and Tertullus accuse Paul before Felix?
 - (d) For how long did Felix imprison Paul so that he could discuss Jesus?
 - (e) When speaking to Felix, how does Paul emphasise the continuity of the Christian gospel with the Old Testament hope of Israel?
 - (f) How does he distinguish 'The Way of Jesus' from Judaism?
 - (g)
 - (i) What indications are there that Felix is corrupt?
 - (ii) If "all power corrupts" then is Felix to blame for his corruption? Why/why not?

(g) Read Acts 24:10-27 again.

Note the verses that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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4. Read Acts chs 25-26.

Note the verses from ch 26 that describe each of the aspects below:

addressed to Jews or Gentiles or both	salvation history	sin	forgive- ness of sins	judge- ment	death of Jesus	resurr- ection of Jesus	repent- ance	baptism	Holy Spirit	salvation
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5. (a) From the two evangelistic speeches above which of Paul's defences do you find the most compelling?

(b) Why?

(c) Are there any things here that might help us with evangelism?

To finish

6. (a) How do you think Paul felt when he met Felix, Festus and Agrippa?

(b) Should it make any difference to you when you meet someone powerful or important?

Why/why not?

(c) Are Christians immune to corruption? Why/why not?

(d) If a Christian was to say "the devil made me do it" and blames the devil rather than taking responsibility for his actions then isn't that similar to saying "all power corrupts" and blaming the inherent corruption of power rather than taking responsibility for his actions? Why/why not?

(e) Should a Christian ever blame the devil for his/her actions?

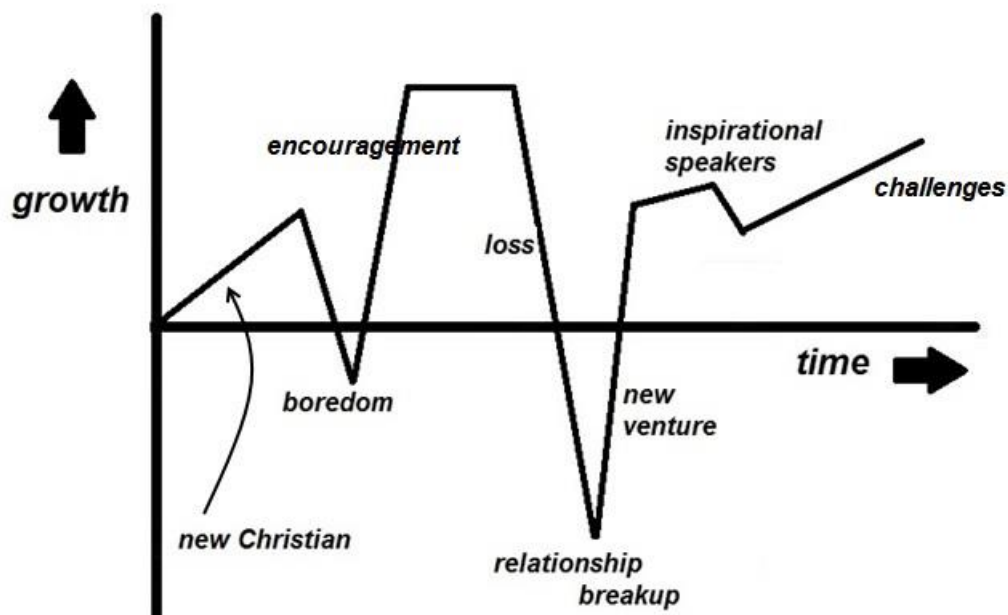
Study 18, Acts chs 27-28, Malta & Rome

Getting started

1. I was listening to a sermon from a minister at St Barnabas, Broadway. He was preaching about suffering and made the statement: "All suffering flows out of humanity's rejection of God as described in Gen 3."
Agree or disagree? Why/why not?



2. This is our final study on Acts and the final questions ask us to look back over the book of Acts to see where we were most comforted, encouraged and challenged. We can do a similar thing by looking back over our lives. Do you ever look back and think about how things have gone in your life? What events loomed large and how did they affect you? Think about these things in terms of how comforting, encouraging and challenging these events were for your faith/growth in Jesus. We could represent this pictorially by making a graph like the one below:

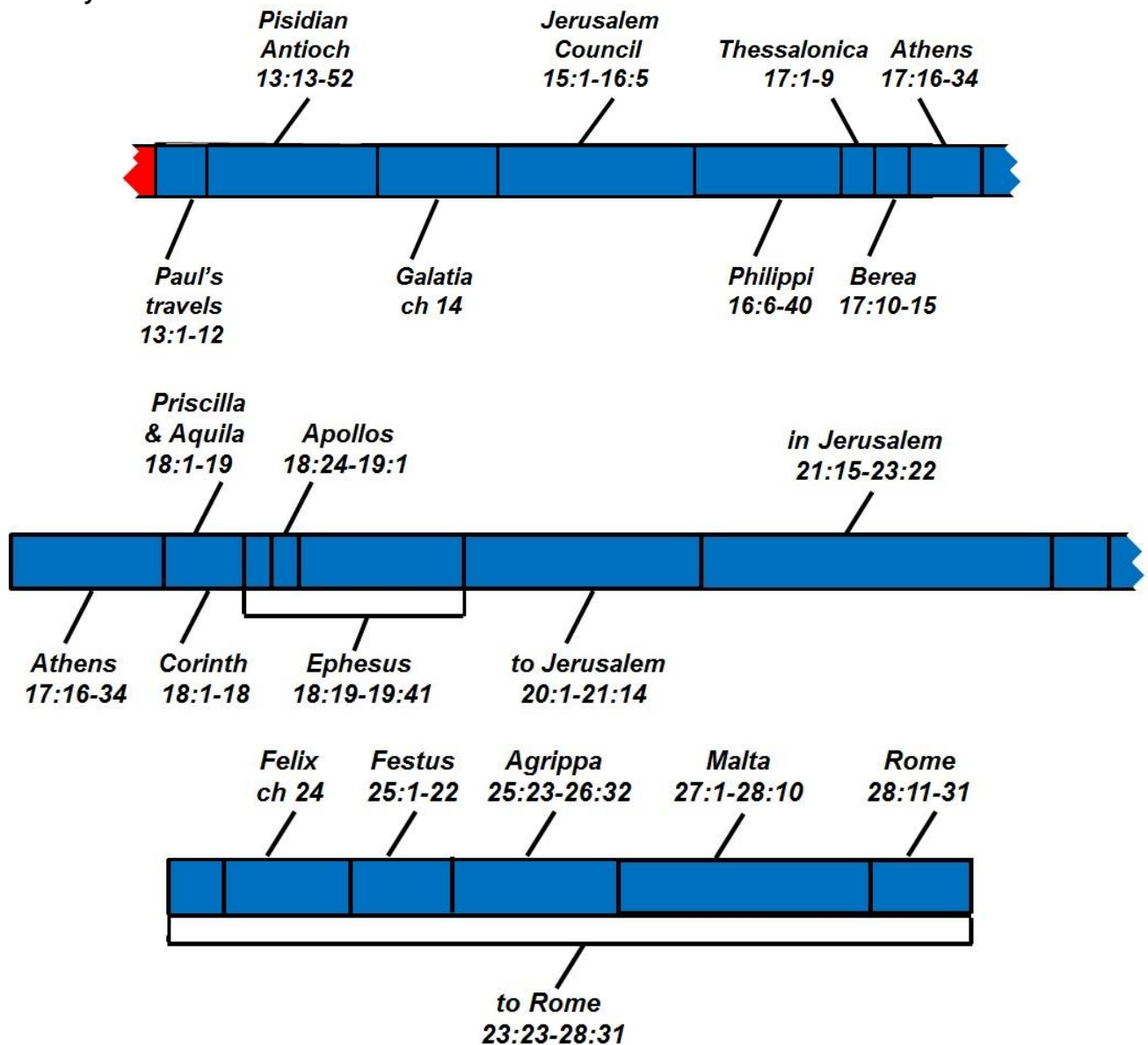


(a) What would your "growth graph" look like?

(b) What events gave you the most comfort, encouragement and challenge?

This question has been very inward looking which is good for us from time to time. To balance things up the last question will be more outward looking.

The story so far . . .



Focusing on Paul, he and Barnabas began their first missionary journey. Wherever they went people became disciples but some Jews opposed and persecuted them. Some people said you couldn't be saved unless you were circumcised. This dispute was taken to the Jerusalem Council. Paul continued his travels but this time with Silas and Timothy. They went to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, where they met Aquila and Priscilla, and then on to Ephesus. Eventually they arrived at Jerusalem where Paul was beaten and arrested. Paul appealed to Caesar because he was a Roman citizen. So he was now to be taken to Rome. On the way Paul was tried by Governors Felix and Festus and then he met with King Agrippa.

Bible

3. Read Acts 27:1-28:6.
(a) What suffering is described in this story?

(b) Is any of the suffering the result of humanity's rejection of God?

What has caused the suffering?

(c) God made the world with gravity, storms, snakes and humans who feel pain. Do you think these things existed before Adam and Eve sinned i.e. before the Fall? Why/why not?

The Biblical authors knew about darkness and that we were born in the midst of dysfunction and chaos but Biblical faith does not regard it as inevitable that we must go on living in these ways and, in fact, the opposite is the case – the people of God are called not to live in those ways but to live in a different way in God's kingdom.

From Iain Provan's lecture "On Living in a Blighted World" at Scots Presbyterian Church, Sydney, 13/8/2016.

4. Read Acts 28:7-31.
Acts finishes with Paul under house arrest in Rome, the centre of the then known world, proclaiming the gospel "with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31). How is this a fitting ending to the book?

To finish

5. It has been said that the Book of Acts is more the acts of the risen Lord Jesus than it is the acts of the Apostles. Do you agree with this? Why/why not?
6. As you studied Acts what passage or event
 - (a) most comforted or encouraged you?
 - (b) most challenged you?
7. Looking back at your answer to Q2 b, what can you do for other people to comfort, encourage and challenge them?