

# Summary Overview of the Book of Acts

## Act One

Acts begins with Luke identifying this Gospel as a continuation of his first account, in the Gospel of Luke. Luke begins with Jesus' final words to His apostles, after He gives them the imperative command for the Great Commission, to go into all the world, starting in Jerusalem but including Samaria and the ends of the world (Acts 1:8). The book begins with the establishment of the Church on earth and the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit after which He ascends to the Father. The temporal Church in Jerusalem begins with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit onto the apostles and the bold sermons by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, fulfilling the Old testament prophesy of Joel where God said that He would pour out His spirit (Joel 2:28-32). This is followed by a description of the beginning of the structure of a liturgical life (which is still characteristic of Christian life today); a) fellowship of the believers, b) sharing of their belongings, 3) meeting daily in the breaking of bread, 4) praising God in prayer, and 5) devoting themselves to the teachings of the apostles. This section ends with Luke recounting that these actions gained favor among the people and numbers being saved increased day by day.

## Act Two

Peter and John on their way to the temple healed a lame man (3:1-10) inciting the Jewish elders which ended with Peter and John being brought to the Jewish Council and commanded to speak no more about Jesus. Luke uses their bold sermon in response to them to demonstrate the apostles resolve when they replied saying **"we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard"** even in the face of arrest, although they were eventually released. throughout Acts Luke will continue to present these bold sermons to continue to illustrate the strength and courage of these first apostles. Luke follows this with two distinct examples of apply Christian principles, each one related to the proper distribution of one's goods, the positive way with the account of Barnabas, and the second way negative with that account of Ananias and Sapphira who made the same offering as Barnabas but withheld some and lied to the apostles. Luke indicates the grave consequences of the negative way as they were struck dead on the spot and also relates the great fear felt by those both inside and outside the Church.

In similar fashion to what Christ had done, the apostles continued to work *many signs and wonders* and through this and their teaching add more and more believers to the Church healing many of the sick who were brought to them. And just as Jesus was persecuted so now the apostles experience persecution when the high priest and the religious leaders "rose up...and [were] filled with jealousy and they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison recalling the warning Jesus gave to His disciples:

*"If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you as well; if they kept My word, they will keep yours as well. 21But they will treat you like this on account of My name, because they do not know the One who sent Me."* (John 15:20-21)

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However the apostles were also strengthened by God's word when He said: *"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you."* (Deut 31:6) and the Lord opened up the prison doors and brought them out and told them to *"stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life"*. It is here that we also see God working through the Jewish people when the apostles are saved from almost certain martyrdom through the intervention of the well respected Jewish elder Gamaliel who advocates for tolerance towards the apostles.

### Act Three

The persecution of the apostle is now heightened with the first martyr, Stephen being stoned to death for proclaiming the truth of the gospel. Luke introduces us to one of the great apostles of the Early Church next to Peter when Luke relates that while Stephen is being stoned *"witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man names Saul"*. Luke sets the stage for the conversion of Saul by telling of Saul's ravaging of the church by having believers arrested, dragging them off to prison, both men and women causing the Church too scatter. However the Holy Spirit transforms this scattering so that the message of the Gospel spreads even further. Stephen's martyrdom is a prelude of what is to come as the Church will survive and grow on the blood of the martyrs. Also important in this "Act Three" is Stephen's eloquent speech which Luke has placed alongside of the sermons given by Peter, however it is also important to note that Stephen, who is a Hellene, will force the apostles to make a crucial decision regarding the obligation to extend this new Christian faith to non-Jews and preserve the unity and *κοινωνία* of the community.

### Act Four

Here the man called Saul, the great persecutor of the Church, will now come center stage in Acts as Saul undergoes his conversion when he encounters the Person of Jesus Christ and is struck down and becomes blinded. This shows us two things; that no human is beyond saving and that no matter how hard their heart is, God can soften any heart and bring that person to salvation. Luke also reminds us that when people persecute Christians, they are really persecuting Jesus Himself which is seen in Jesus' question to Saul; *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?"* Luke also recounts Ananias' fear and anxiety about receiving the newly converted Saul but sees the Holy Spirit operating in Saul.

### Act Five

With the conversion of Saul the focus of Acts shifts to the travels of Saul (now Paul) and Barnabas as they are sent by the Church elders to spread the Gospel message. While they enjoy much success in their mission work and are able to train and appoint elders (presbyters)

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in the areas they evangelize there also remain persecution as the apostles are arrested and jailed and Paul is stoned almost to the point of death.

What comes to the forefront of this section of Acts now is the question of “what must a non-Jewish convert do to inherit eternal life”. Earlier, Peter dealt with this question in regards to the challenge of dietary restrictions for the Gentiles which led to Peter’s dramatic vision from God that all food fit to eat, except for a few expectations that will be brought up during this second debate.

Peter’s conversion of one Gentile and his family (Cornelius) amidst a largely Jewish population could be seen as acceptable however with the success of Paul and Barnabas in converting large populations of mostly Gentiles, the Jewish elders began to see this as an impending dilution of Judaism from the Christian faith. This comes to a head with Church calling back Paul and Barnabas to discuss the question of the basic covenantal symbol of Judaism – circumcision. This event is recognized at the first ecumenical council of the Christian Church with James, the brother of our Lord as the head of the council who ultimately makes the decision that circumcision would NOT be required of the Gentiles and sends Paul back out with an official letter proclaiming the decisions of this council . Henceforth admission into the Christian faith is no longer is it about race, it is now about Grace. Christianity and the following Christ has now moved on beyond Judaism and become a separate religion which will reach to all the corners of the world.

### Act Six

The focus is now once again on the evangelizing or missionary work by Barnabas and Saul as they are sent by the Church continue to spread the Word of Christ. Their missionary journeys take them through Asia Minor and Greece passing through Cyprus, landing at Perga, then up into Antioch and down to Iconium and Lystra. Their encounters with an increasing multitude of Gentiles meets with much success however a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas causes them to part ways so that the remainder of Acts is focused on the missionary work of Paul. Together with his disciple Timothy, Paul travels through Phrygia and Galatia, however when they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to, so they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas and on into Macedonia. With the verse regarding the decision to travel to Macedonia the verb tense changes from third person (he, they) to first person (we) indicating that Luke is now traveling with the apostle Paul and is writing from a first-person vantage point. At Philippi Paul’s successful encounter with Lydia and her conversion is countered with the female prophetess which results in Paul and Silas being tortured and jailed. As previously the hand of God intervenes and the doors of the jail and their chains are loosed, however this time Paul refuses to flee even when the magistrates commanded that they be set free. Paul calls on his citizenship as a Roman to secure his legal release and after staying with the newly converted Lydia and her family they depart for Thessalonica.

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## Act Seven

Paul's travels now take him through Greece, first through Thessaloniki and then to Berea where they once again were met with hostility by the elders of the Jewish communities there. The charge they levy against Paul and Silas are hauntingly similar to the charges the Jewish elders told Pilate regarding Jesus: "They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." Paul then travels to Athens and in a brilliant display of logic and debate engage the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers on Mars Hill. Mars Hill is the Roman name for a hill in Athens, Greece, called the Areopagus. Ares was the Greek god of war and according to Greek mythology Mars Hill was the place where Ares stood trial before the other gods for the murder of Poseidon's son. Mars Hill served as the meeting place for the Areopagus Court, the highest court in Greece for civil, criminal, and religious matters. During the time of the New Testament, Mars Hill remained an important meeting place where philosophy, religion, and law were discussed.

Luke offers the biblical significance of Mars Hill not only in choosing the location (Mars Hill) but also recording a masterfully orchestrated apologetic by Paul. His presentation of the gospel is a great example for us, both as a pattern for how Paul identified with his audience and as an example of apologetics in action. He connects with his audience with his opening address to those philosophers gathered at the Areopagus, by acknowledging that he observed them to be "very religious," based on the fact that they had many altars and "objects of worship" including an altar to "the Unknown God." Paul then uses that altar to introduce them to the one true God and the only way of salvation, Jesus Christ. It was this altar and their religious idolatry that Paul used as a starting point in proclaiming to them the one true God and how they could be reconciled to Him. Paul started his message by addressing the false beliefs of those gathered there that day and then used those beliefs as a way of presenting the Gospel message to them.

After this Paul travels to Corinth where he meets Aquila and his wife Priscilla both of whom will travel with Paul and become very influential and helpful to the Christian mission. Paul is again met with hostility from the Jewish leadership of Corinth who make a united attack against Paul for his preaching of the Gospel, and just as Gamaliel came to his defense earlier now help comes from Gallio was Roman proconsul of Achaia showing that God's favor was continually on Paul and his fellow apostles and also indicates that Rome was not yet hostile to the Christian message as they would become later with the great persecutions. After spending some time in Ephesus and Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

In Ephesus Luke recounts Paul's encounter with some disciples who, although baptized had not heard of the Holy Spirit and also met others attempting to drive out demons without a well-guided understanding thus demonstrating that without proper teaching and oversight the theology of the Christian message could become misguided and even dangerous as the ones attempting to drive out the demons were themselves beaten and injured causing fear among the community especially those practicing magic and sorcery causing "the word of the Lord to spread widely and grow in power".

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## Act Eight

After all this had happened, Paul decides to go to Jerusalem, after first passing through Macedonia and Achaia. and then we hear Paul state “I must visit Rome also”. Before he leaves Ephesus Paul gathers together the elders of the Church community at Miletus and there and offers a guide on how to be pastoral.

His words show how Paul establishes the role of bishop as overseer of the communities he establishes and the advice he offers is still valid to priests today:

- Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.
- Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood
- Be on your guard for after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.
- I commit you to God and to the word of His Grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Paul then continues his journey on the way back to Jerusalem traveling through Kos, Rhodes and to Patara on to Syria landing at Tyre, where they stayed with friends. Luke also provides a hint of what is to come when he relates that these disciples moved by the Holy Spirit urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

Arriving in Jerusalem Paul is greeted by James and the other elders, however shortly after his arrival in Jerusalem, the whole city was aroused against him angered by Paul’s success with the Gentile mission. Even though Paul follows Jewish tradition by purifying himself before entering the temple, the crowd seizes him and drag him from the Temple. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar he took some officers and soldiers and when the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. At this point Paul, claiming his rights as a roman citizen is allowed to address the crown by the Roman official. Paul’s speech recount his life as a Jew, a persecutor of Christians and his conversion to the Gospel of Christ, however this does not win over the crowd as was the case in his other speeches. He then calls upon his Roman citizenship as protection from flogging and death without a trial to which he is again put in prison and is quickly sent before the Sanhedrin. Luke offers the series of events that follows as a striking resemblance to the final days of Christ’s life:

- The list of charges is levied against Paul similar to those levied against Christ
- Some defend Paul while other accuse him
- They begins the plot to have Paul killed.

A striking difference is that unlike Christ’s silence and mild manner, Paul is pointedly accusatory towards the Jewish elders of the Sanhedrin.

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Paul is now transferred by ship to Caesarea where he will be brought before the high priest Ananias and a lawyer named Tertullus, where they will bring their charges against Paul before the governor Felix. This now is the ultimate step foreseen by Christ in the opening chapter of Acts (1:8):

*"...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

While Paul remains in prison the governor Felix passes on the case of Paul to the succeeding proconsul Festus to whom Paul makes his appeal stating:

"I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar."

Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?" Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. 11 If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!" To which Festus declares: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

Paul's case now is brought before King Agrippa and Felix's words to the King as the same as those spoken by Pilate regarding Christ:

"I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome."

The king allows Paul to address him and he relates to him the same events of his life and conversion to which King Agrippa agreed that "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment."

Luke ends the Book of Acts with Paul's stormy travel to Rome and once there Paul makes his final appeal to the Jews of the community there attempting to assure them that "I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors." Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe leaving Paul, after quoting the prophesy of Isaiah made his final statement to show that God's message of salvation was in fact universal:

*"Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"*