

New Testament Survey #2

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

1. Background & Authorship

- Acts is Luke's second volume. His first account records what Jesus *began* to do (Luke 1:1) and the second volume records what Jesus *continued* to do by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
- The book of Acts covers approximately thirty years of early church history.
- Luke wrote Acts and participated in some of the action. The point of view changes from third person to first person the three times Luke joins the narrative (16:10; 20:5; 27:2).

2. Purpose and Theme

- Luke wanted to demonstrate the growth of the Church from the isolated city of Jerusalem to the great metropolis of Rome through the infilling, empowerment, and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The content of Acts suggests it was written at least in part as a political apology. The events Luke chose to record emphasize that Jesus and the apostles (especially Paul) were law-abiding persons. Paul is presented as a Roman citizen, moving confidently around the eastern Empire, enjoying the support of the best elements in provincial society. Acts ends with Paul under house arrest yet preaching freely in Rome.

- Luke wrote the history of Acts to **confirm** what Theophilus and others had been **taught**. Luke was not just recording true facts so that we would know what happened long ago. Rather, he was drawing attention to teachings that were foundational to the church.

It seemed good ... to me to write... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:3-4)

*The first account I composed, about all that Jesus **began** to do and teach... (Acts 1:1)*

Acts records the essentials of the Gospel in the early Apostle’s teaching. Luke registers 12 apostolic proclamations revealing the core content of the Apostolic Gospel: Jesus’s identity as Lord and Savior, his first and second comings, his fulfillment of ancient prophecies, and his ramifications for humanity.

3. Structure

- Luke organized his work by incorporating “progress reports” at various intervals throughout his account.

He underlined that the movement of the Gospel from its Jerusalem-based, Judaism-oriented beginnings to its becoming a worldwide, Gentile-predominant phenomenon is orchestrated by the Holy Spirit therefore no form of adversity or opposition could stop the spread of the Gospel and the growth of the church.

Passage	Progress Report	Section Summary
2:47	And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.	The promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the first sermon.
6:7	So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.	The primitive church in Jerusalem, its early preaching, its common life, its spread and its initial opposition.
9:31	Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.	The first geographical expansion, carried out by the "Hellenists" (Greek-speaking Jewish Christians) to diaspora Jews or "nearly Jews" (Samaritans and a proselyte). Includes the conversion of Paul.
12:24	But the word of the Lord continued to spread and flourish.	First expansion to the Gentiles. The conversion of Cornelius is told twice. It includes also the story of

		the church in Antioch, where Gentile conversion is carried out by the Hellenists in a purposeful way.
16:5	So the churches were strengthened in their faith and grew daily in numbers.	The first geographical expansion into the Gentile world, with Paul in the leadership. Jews now regularly reject the Gospel because it includes Gentiles. The church meets in council and does not reject, nor does it lay Jewish religious requirements on the Gentile believers. The Council serves as the key to full expansion into the Gentile world.
19:20	In this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.	The further, ever westward, expansion into the Gentile world, now into Europe. Repeatedly the Jews reject and the Gentiles welcome the Gospel.
28:31, 32	For two years Paul stayed in a rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!	The events that move Paul and the Gospel on to Rome, with a great deal of interest in Paul's trials, in which three times he is declared innocent of any wrongdoing. ¹

4. The Sermons of Acts

If we pay close attention to the sermons recorded in the book of Acts, we will see that “the Apostolic Gospel’s core content concerned Jesus Christ: his identity, his first and second comings, his fulfillment of ancient prophecies, and his ramifications for individual and corporate humanity.”²

The sermons included in the book of Acts (2:14-40; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32; 10:34-43; 13:16-41) developed these themes concerning Jesus Christ and affirmed that all of this happened in fulfillment of the promises God made to the people of Israel. Luke proclaimed to the people of his day through his historical account the centrality of Christ.

GALATIANS: The Freedom Letter

¹ Fee & Stuart: How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth. Zondervan, 199, p. 100.

² <http://www.fidworks.com/2015/05/21-apostolic-gospel.html>.

1. Background & Authorship

- Paul and Barnabas established churches in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia on their first missionary journey. After Paul left the region, teachers known as “Judaizers” visited the Galatian churches and were upsetting the believers with a “different gospel.”

The Judaizers believed that the Mosaic Law and circumcision were essential for salvation. They also questioned Paul’s apostleship.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:6)

Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead... (Galatians 1:1)

- Galatians is considered by most scholars to be the earliest of Paul’s epistles. He wrote it around 48 AD, after his first missionary journey but before the Jerusalem Council. Galatians was a circular letter to the congregations in Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

2. Purpose and Theme

- Paul wrote this letter in response to the false teachings introduced by the Judaizers. He understood what was at stake was not merely the ritual of circumcision, but the essence of the Gospel. Galatians refutes the Judaizers and proclaims the true Gospel.

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not

another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. (Galatians 1:6-7)

- Galatians was written to defend Paul's apostolic message and authority. Paul reveals autobiographical information to validate apostolic authority.

Paul defends his authority not because he wants respect, but because he needed to defend his message. (If the messenger is not reliable, neither is the message.)

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. (Galatians 1:15-18)

3. Style

- The style of the epistle is passionate, bold, and abrupt. **Paul skips his usual opening expression of thanksgiving for the church and plunges at once into his polemic.**
- Galatians is filled with some of Paul's most pointed and biting language.

As for those who are troubling you, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves! (Galatians 5:12)

- Paul was agitated and deeply troubled over his converts and fearful that his labor might have been in vain. *I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. (Galatians 4:11)*

4. Content

The epistle to the Galatians can be divided into three main sections, all of them aiming to refute the false teachings of the Judaizers and to defend the true Gospel of justification by faith alone.

- Chapters 1 and 2 recall some historical accounts about maintaining the independence and authority of his apostleship, and the divine origin of the Gospel.
- Chapters 3 and 4 are a series of theological arguments for the doctrine of justification by faith. Paul points to the Galatians' early experience of salvation, the faith of Abraham, and the record of Abraham's wives and sons to explain that believers are justified by means of faith **alone**.
- Chapters 5 and 6 address a number of practical problems that the false teachers had caused. Paul points the Galatians to the freedom they have in Christ, freedom the Law doesn't offer.

THESSALONIANS: Persecution and Christ's Return

I and II Thessalonians are the second and third canonic letters written by Paul.

1. Background & Authorship

- Paul, Silas, and Timothy planted the church in Thessalonica during Paul's second missionary journey.

The city of Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was large and prosperous because of its ideal harbor and maritime commerce, and its location on one of Rome's main highways, the Egnatian Way.

- They preached in the Thessalonian synagogue for three weeks with significant results before they were ejected. (Acts 17:2-4)

And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.

- After a city uproar, Paul and his team were taken to Berea where they preached the Gospel with exceptional results, until a group of jealous Jews from Thessalonica caused them to leave. (Acts 17:13-15)
- Paul went to Athens while Silas and Timothy remained for a time in Macedonia. After a short time in Athens, Paul made his way to Corinth.
- Timothy and Silas joined Paul in Corinth, and brought news concerning the church in Thessalonica. Paul then wrote I Thessalonians, around 50 AD.
- Shortly after the first letter was delivered to the church in Thessalonica, a message was returned to Paul with news that persecution was continuing and the eschatological errors had grown worse. Paul then wrote the second letter to the Thessalonians.

A counterfeit letter had been sent to Thessalonica from some unknown source purporting to be from Paul, and declaring that the day of the Lord had already come.

2. Purpose & Theme

- The first letter to the Thessalonians was a response to the concerns Timothy brought to Paul when he met him at Corinth.
- The church had some confusion about the return of Christ.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

(I Thessalonians. 4:13, 14)

There are more eschatological references than any other letter of Paul's. Every chapter ends with an exhortation concerning the return of the Lord.

- Men were maligning Paul's character and motives.

Paul determined that it was necessary to defend his character, not for his own validation, but for the sake of the believers in Thessalonica.

...just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. (I Thessalonians 1:5)

- The second letter to the Thessalonians corrected more misinterpretations of Paul's teaching of Jesus's second coming.
- The church needed to be encouraged to continue in the midst of persecutions.

But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance. (II Thessalonians 3:3, 5)

- The church needed to be assured they had not missed the second coming.

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to Him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed

to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. (II Thessalonians 2: 1-2)

Some got lazy and quit work! "...if anyone will not work, neither let him eat." (II Thessalonians 3:10)

Paul made it clear that Christ's coming will be majestic, that it will mean punishment for people who refuse to know God and who reject the gospel, and that it will bring rest and glory to believers (1:7-10). This is designed to bring comfort in the midst of unfair persecution.

- The church needed to be confronted about the opposition to his authority that had developed.

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. (II Thessalonians 3:6, 14)

We can see that in Thessalonica the problems were many but interrelated. Persecution had opened the door for misconceptions about the immediate return of Christ. Those wrong beliefs led to practical problems such as discouragement and irresponsibility. The combination of these features became fertile ground for false prophets. False prophets could only survive if they were able to discredit the authority of the apostle Paul.

Paul responded to these problems calling on believers in Thessalonica to cool down their overheated eschatology and to give proper attention to life in the here and now. A balanced eschatology resolved many of their practical problems and gave them the proper hope. It encouraged the Thessalonians to remain faithful and holy while they awaited the Lord's return and the fullness of the age to come.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Galatians was written to refute the idea that works can earn or guarantee our salvation. Many theological errors have occurred because of a misinterpretation of the relationship of salvation and good works. How does Galatians help us have the proper understanding of these two?
2. Both epistles to the Thessalonians have a strong theology of work. Different forms of the word work are used repeatedly throughout these epistles. What are some of the assertions Paul makes concerning work?

HOMEWORK

1. Choose three of the apostolic proclamations registered in Acts. What elements are recurrent in the apostolic message?

2:14-41	Peter speaks to the Pentecost crowd
3:12-4:2	Peter speaks to the Temple crowd
4:8-12	Peter's defense to the Jewish leaders
5:29-32	Peter's defense to the Sanhedrin
7:1-60	Stephen's defense to the Sanhedrin

- 10:34-43 Peter speaks to Cornelius's household
- 13:16-41 Paul speaks to Pisidian Antioch's Synagogue.
- 14:8-18 Paul speaks to Lystra's pagan crowd
- 17:2-3 Paul speaks to Thessalonica's Synagogue.
- 17:16-31 Paul speaks to Athens' Areopagus
- 26:1-29 Paul's defense to King Agrippa
- 28:17-31 Paul speaks to Rome's Jewish leaders